CROSSGEN COMICS

THE PATH

1 APR

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RON MARZ
BART SEARS
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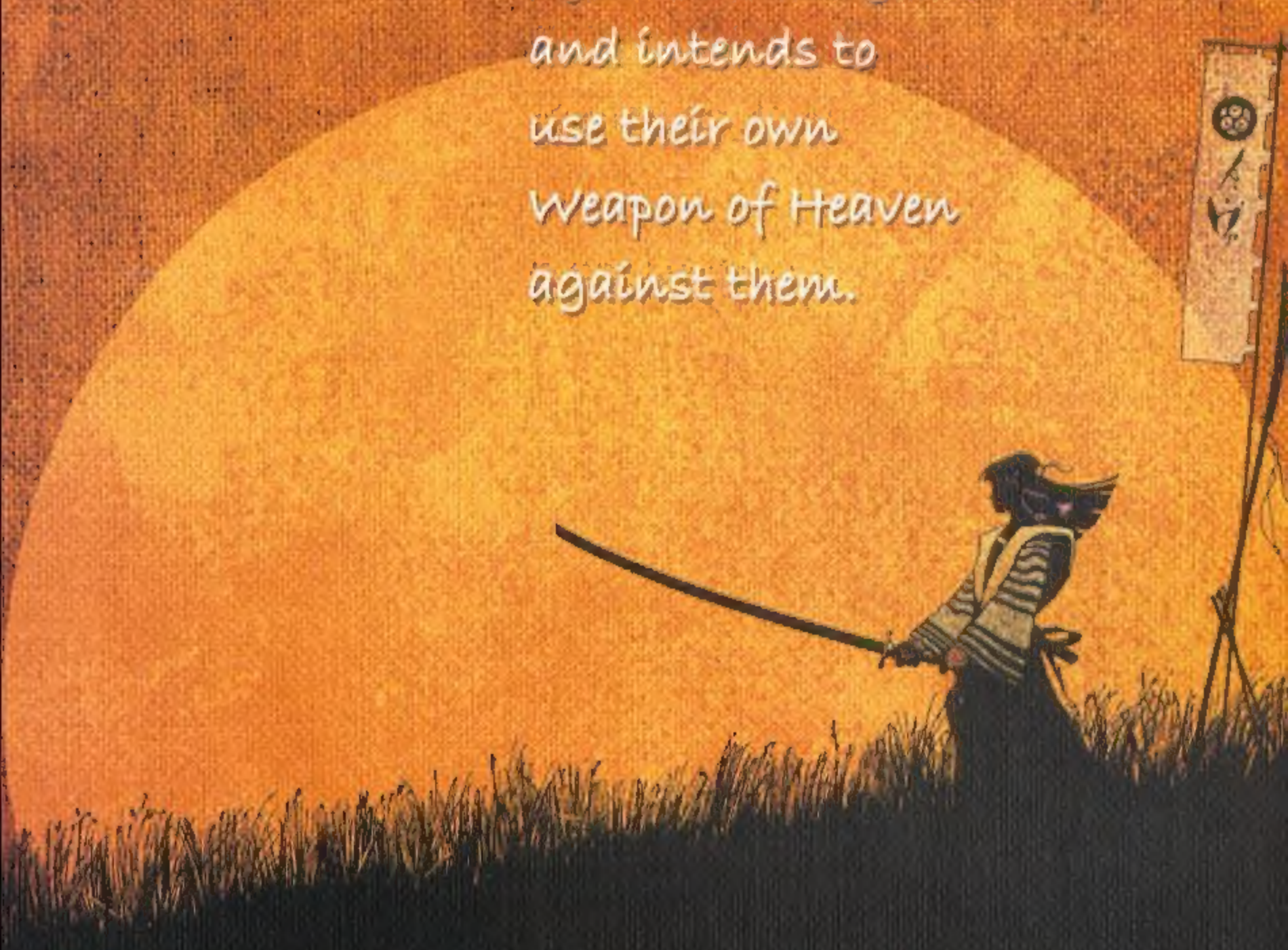
THUS FAR

ON THE PATH...

The warlord Todosi of the island nation of Nayado is dead at the hands of the gods to whom he prayed for deliverance. Now his brother, the monk Obo-san, has sworn vengeance against those gods, and intends to use their own Weapon of Heaven against them.



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"DO YOU REMEMBER THAT NIGHT?

"I WAS THERE...

"...YOU...

"...MITSUMUNE...

"...AND MY BROTHER."

LET ME.

"IT WAS THAT SAKE BAR DOWN BY THE DOCKS. I DON'T THINK IT EVEN EXISTS ANYMORE."

WE DID NOT COME HERE FOR TROUBLE.

FOUR NOBLEMEN GONE SLUMMING FOR THE NIGHT, THINKING TO CONCEAL THEMSELVES AMONG THE RABBLE.

SUCH A RISKY ENDEAVOR...

...PARTICULARLY WITH THE ***CROWN PRINCE*** AMONG YOUR NUMBER...

...AND IN SUCH A FAMOUSLY ***DANGEROUS*** AREA OF YAZAKI.

I CAN UNDERSTAND THE ***BITTERNESS*** OF THE NOGAWA CLAN. YOU HAVE LONG BEEN ***RIVALS*** TO THE OHIRAS...

...YET ***THEY*** STILL SIT UPON THE THRONE OF PETALS.

THERE WAS A TIME, THOUGH, WHEN THE NOGAWAS WERE A LITTLE MORE ***CIRCUMSPECT*** IN THEIR MACHINATIONS.

AND A TIME WHEN THEY DIDN'T SEND ***FOOLS*** ON THEIR ERRANDS.

NO?

THEN WHY *DID* YOU COME HERE, TSUGAWA TODOSI?

NOGAWA CUR.

IF IT'S *STEEL* HE WANTS—

RYUICHI...

...*LET* TODOSI.

YOU INSULT ME?!

THE TSUGAWAS HAVE *ALWAYS* BEEN LAP DOGS TO THE OHIRAS...

...NOW YOU CAN
DIE
LIKE A DOG!

THE REST OF YOU...
LEAVE AND *LIVE*. STAY AND *DIE*.

GRRLL

WE ARE SIX TO YOUR ONE!

YOU WERE SEVEN.

GAAH!

EYAAH!

GRGL

GHK!

HLRK

HTT

SEE?

IT SEEMS SO *NEAR*, DOESN'T IT, RYUICHI?

LIKE YESTERDAY.

AND YET IT WAS SO LONG AGO...

...BUT THIS IS AS MITSUMUNE HAS COMMANDED, AND IT WILL BE SO.

JUST AS HE COMMANDED WE ATTACK SHINACEA AND PROVOKE THE SLEEPING DRAGON?

THE CAMPAIGN WAS *DOOMED* BEFORE IT BEGAN.

BUT TODOSIS BRAVERY DROVE THE SHINACEAN BARBARIANS FROM OUR SHORES, OBO-SAN.

MIND YOUR *TONGUE*, OBO-SAN. EVEN AROUND THE SERVANTS.

ESPECIALLY AROUND THE SERVANTS.

YES, WE ALL GREW UP TOGETHER, BUT MITSUMUNE IS *EMPEROR* NOW.

IT IS TREASON TO SAY SUCH THINGS. TO EVEN *THINK* THEM.

AND SO MUCH HAS *CHANGED.*

MITSUMUNE SITS UPON THE THRONE OF PETALS. YOU NOW SERVE HIM AS GENERAL OF HIS ARMIES

...AND WE PREPARE FOR MY BROTHER'S *FUNERAL*

UNUSUAL, DON'T YOU THINK, TO HOLD SUCH A CEREMONY WITHIN THE WALLS OF THE ROYAL CASTLE?

MANY THINGS ARE UNUSUAL THESE DAYS OBO-SAN

LEAVE US, BOTH OF YOU

YOUR BROTHER *SAVED* NAYADO.

YES, MY LORD

I WOULD NOT HAVE BEEN *NECESSARY* FOR MY BROTHER TO SAVE NAYADO HAD THE EMPEROR NOT PLACED IT IN DANGER

I COME TO DOUBT IF MITSUMUNE IS FIT TO *RULE*

NOT SAYING A THING DOES NOT MAKE IT GO AWAY

TELL ME YOU HAVE NOT HAD THESE THOUGHTS, RYUICHI MY BROTHER'S DEATH MAKES *YOU* WARLORD

NOW *YOU* SERVE MITSUMUNE'S WHIMS

IT BECOMES MORE AND MORE OBVIOUS HIS SENSES ARE AFFLICTED THE MAD CAMPAIGN AGAINST SHINACEA IS ONLY THE MOST *RECENT* INCIDENT

MITSUMUNE WILL LEAD NAYADO TO ITS *RUIN*

THIS IS NOT A DISCUSSION I WILL HAVE WITH YOU. NOT *TODAY,* NOT ANY *OTHER* DAY

I WILL FORGET THESE WORDS PASSED YOUR LIPS, OBO-SAN *YOU* WOULD BE WISE TO DO THE SAME

IT'S SAID THE GODS FAVORED YOUR BROTHER UPON THE BATTLEFIELD

THE GODS *DESTROYED* MY BROTHER UPON THE BATTLEFIELD

TOPOS! ALWAYS SERVED THE GODS FAITHFULLY

HIS REWARD FOR THAT LOYALTY WAS *DEATH*

I DO

WHAT DO YOU INTEND TO *DO* WITH IT?

I KNOW NOT THE WEAPON'S *TRUE POWER*

BUT I HAVE SWORN MY *VENGEANCE* UPON THE FALSE GODS TO WHOM I ONCE PRAYED

NO

THE WEAPON IS *EVIL* I PONDERED DESTROYING IT BECAUSE IT *IS* A THING OF THE GODS BUT DID NOT ALLOW MYSELF TO DO SO

IT IS TOO VALUABLE AS A TOOL FOR MY VENGEANCE

I WILL LET IT BE USED FOR NO *OTHER* PURPOSE

THEY'RE HERE

ENTER

SUCH *BITTERNESS* HAS NEVER BEEN YOUR WAY OBO-SAN

ONCE I WAS A MAN OF FAITH

NO MORE

IT IS *ALSO* SAID THE GODS LEFT BEHIND A WEAPON OF HEAVEN. AND THAT YOU USED IT TO *BANISH* THEM

THE GODS ARE *COWARDLY* THEY FLED WHEN I BRANDISHED THEIR OWN WEAPON AT THEM

AND YOU STILL POSSESS IT?

THOUGH I DESPISE EVEN ITS TOUCH *THIS* WILL BE THE INSTRUMENT OF MY REVENGE

I WILL USE THE GODS *OWN WEAPON* AGAINST THEM

SUCH A WEAPON

SUCH A WEAPON WOULD MAKE NAYADO *INVINCIBLE* UPON THE FIELD OF BATTLE

EVEN MIGHTY *SHINACEA* WOULD HAVE REASON TO FEAR US

IT'S TIME

AIKO AND I WILL ESCORT YOU

YOU AND WU-F WERE MY BROTHER'S STAUNCHEST COMRADES. I KNOW THIS CANNOT BE AN EASY DAY

FOR *YOU* ESPECIALLY

YOUR FAMILY TOOK ME IN WHEN I WAS A CHILD OBO SAN I AM WHAT I AM TODAY BECAUSE OF YOUR GENEROSITY

I GRIEVE BECAUSE NAYAPO HAS LOST AN HONORED SON AND A TRUE HERO

YOUR CONCERN IS MOST KIND, OBO SAN

BUT I AM ACCUSTOMED TO HIDING MY FEELINGS

BUT YOU AND TODOSI WERE CLOSE

YOUR GRIEF IS KEENER THAN MOST WOULD KNOW

OF COURSE

BROTHER

HERE HE COMES

HE ALWAYS DID FAVOR MAKING AN ENTRANCE

OBO SAN

YOUR BROTHER'S DEATH IS MY BROTHER'S DEATH

TOPOS WAS NOT ONLY MY LOYAL SERVANT BUT A LOYAL SERVANT TO *ALL* NAYADO

PLEASE

HONOR YOUR BROTHER BY GUIDING HIS JOURNEY TO THE PURE LAND

I WILL NOT DO THIS THING

WHAT IS *THIS?*

I WILL NOT ENGAGE IN A FALSE RITUAL TO FALSE GODS

OUR NATION IS *DIMINISHED* BY HIS LOSS

THANK YOU, EMPEROR MITSUNUNE. YOUR WORDS ARE A COMFORT

I WILL PASS THEM ALONG TO OUR MOTHER WHO AM STILL CONFINED TO HER SICKBED

IT IS THE *LEAST* WE OWE THE TSUGAWAS FOR ALL YOU HAVE DONE

YOU HAVE ALWAYS BEEN

VALUABLE

TO THE OHIRAS

AS YOU WISH, MY EMPEROR

I WILL NOT CARRY ON WITH RITES AND SPEAK WORDS THAT HAVE LOST *ALL MEANING* FOR ME.

I GAVE MY LIFE OVER TO THE GODS BECAUSE I BELIEVED THEY WERE JUST AND NOBLE

BUT TODOSHI'S DEATH AT THEIR HANDS UNMASKED THEM FOR WHAT THEY *TRULY* ARE

I SAW WITH MY OWN EYES THEY ARE NOT THE CREATURES OF PALE BEAUTY WE IMAGINE THEM TO BE

THEY ARE WHITE-FACED *DEMONS*, PETTY AND SPITEFUL

THERE WAS A TIME WHEN MY DEVOTION *FILLED* ME. NOW I AM *EMPTY*

I HAVE SWORN MY BROTHER WILL BE AVENGED

AND I WILL USE THE GODS OWN WEAPON TO **DESTROY** THEM!

HERESY

MY BROTHER'S SPIRIT WILL INDEED JOURNEY TO THE PURE LAND

BUT NOT WITH THE BLESSING OF FALSE GODS

YOUR BROTHER'S *BLOOD* PAID FOR IT DO NOT LET HIS SACRIFICE BE FOR NOTHING

THE WEAPON IS THE MEANS OF OUR VICTORY OVER SHINAGEA FINALLY WE HOLD POWER ENOUGH TO *ANNIHILATE* OUR ENEMIES

I AM SORRY, MY EMPEROR YOU ASK THAT WHICH I CANNOT DO

I CANNOT SURRENDER THE WEAPON

GIVE ME THE WEAPON

OBO-SAN

GIVE ME THE WEAPON

YOU DENY MY W...?

DO NOT PRESUME OUR PAST FRIENDSHIP GRANTS YOU LEAVE TO IGNORE YOUR EMPEROR OBO SAN

GIVE ME THE WEAPON!

I MUST REFUSE

TO PROVOKE SHINAGEA AGAIN IS MADNESS

MY GODS HAVE BETRAYED ME I WILL NOT ALLOW MY NATION TO DO THE SAME TO HER PEOPLE

HOW DARE YOU DEFY ME!

GENERAL RYUICHI!

YOUR BLADE

EMPEROR?

GENERAL RYOBOSHI

...YOUR BLADE!

NO ONE WILL STAND IN MY WAY OBO SAN

YOU DEFY ME

NOT EVEN YOU

I AM THE LIGHT IN WHOSE RADIANCE ALL NAYADO BASKS

I AM THE CHOSEN ONE WHOSE WILL IS THE WILL OF OUR NATION

I WILL LEAD NAYADO TO GLORY UNPARALLELED

WE HAVE BEEN FRIENDS SINCE WE WERE *BOYS*, OBO SAN WE CAME TO MANHOOD TOGETHER

AND DESPITE ALL THIS

I WILL NOT SUFFER A *TRAITOR* TO LIVE

I AM YOUR *EMPEROR*

AND I COMMAND YOU TO TAKE YOUR OWN LIFE!

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ON THE PATH...

At the funeral of his brother, the warlord Todosi, the monk Obo-san refuses to give the powerful Weapon of Heaven to Nayado's Emperor, Mitsumune, whom Obo-san suspects is mad. Mitsumune then commands Obo-san to commit ritual suicide.

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ORO SAN

OBO SAN

DO NOT *IGNORE* ME

NOW TAKE UP THIS BLADE AND CUT OPEN YOUR BELLY!

I *DEMAND* IT!

IF YOU WILL NOT GIVE ME THE WEAPON OF HEAVEN

YOU WILL GIVE ME YOUR LIFE

DID YOU NOT *HEAR ME*, OBO SAN?

I AM THE *EMPEROR MITSUMUNE!*

ALL NAYADO *BOWS DOWN* BEFORE ME!

NO

YOU *DARE* DEFY

MITSUMUNE

YOU MUST LISTEN TO ME

YOU *MUST*

YOU WILL *DESTROY* NAYADO

OUR EMPEROR *MUST* RETURN. CONQUER THIS MADNESS WITHIN YOU, MITSUMUNE, OR ALL WILL BE LOST

DO YOU *UNDERSTAND?*

WHAT HAVE I *DONE?*

I *KILLED* HIM

IT'S NOT TOO LATE, MITSUMUNE

YOU CAN STILL MAKE—

NO

NO, OBO-SAN

I KNOW YOU OF OLD AND YOU ARE *CHANGED*

YOUR DECISIONS ARE NOT THOSE OF THE MAN WHO WAS MY FRIEND

NOT THOSE OF A *RATIONAL* MAN

I KNOW NOT WHAT OR WHY BUT SOME *MALADY* ASSAILS YOUR MIND

IF YOU DO NOT COME TO YOUR SENSES OUR NATION W... SUFFER THE PRICE IF YOU DO NOT *TURN* FROM THIS PATH

THE MARK

YES

I KILLED THEM *ALL*

NAYADO IS MINE TO SAFEGUARD

AND I NEARLY LED IT TO *RUIN*

THERE IS *NO FORGIVENESS* FOR WHAT I'VE DONE

RYU CHI

GIVE ME YOUR SHORT BLADE

YOU WILL ACT AS MY SECOND

PLEASE, MY EMPEROR, THIS IS NOT

DO NOT *ARGUE* WITH YOUR EMPEROR!

YES, MY

LET MY SINS

PLEASE, MY LORD

LET ME *END* IT

NNGH

I HAVE BEEN GRIPPED BY A MADNESS I HAVE SINNED AGAINST MY NATION

THIS I DO TO RESTORE NAYAPOS HONOR

BE WASHED AWAY IN MY BLOOD

HNG

GLCH

GHRN

GYDAH

IS THIS WHAT YOU WANTED? *IS IT?*

TO PLACE NOT ONLY YOUR *BROTHER* UPON A PYRE BUT YOUR *EMPEROR* AS WELL?

WHAT DID YOU *DO* TO HIM OBO SAN?

THERE IS NO *HEIR* TO THE THRONE! OBO SAN NAYADO WILL BE PLUNGED INTO *CHAOS*.

HOW MANY CLANS WILL CHALLENGE THE OTHERS FOR THE THRONE? SIX? EIGHT? *A DOZEN?*

WE NEED WORRY ABOUT *SHINACEA* NO LONGER

WE WILL DESTROY *OURSELVES*

NOTHING

I SIMPLY SPOKE TO HIM, ASKED HIM TO SEE THE *TRUTH* AND HE *DID*

YOU DOUBTED MITSUMUNE'S FITNESS TO RULE! NOW HE IS *DEAD!*

A *COINCIDENCE?* OR DID YOU *WISH* OUR FRIEND'S DEATH?

THIS IS *NOT* WHAT I INTENDED, RYOICHI! YOU KNOW ME WELL ENOUGH TO KNOW *THAT*

I *THOUGHT* I DID

AAAAAA

MITSUMUNE

MITSUMUNE

MITSUMUNE

MITSUMUNE

MITSUMUNE

MITSUMUNE

YOU SEE OBO SAN?

I AM EVEN THE MASTER OF *DEATH*

TRULY I AM A *GOD*

SO

GIVE ME THE WEAPON OF HEAVEN

NOW.

THERE
THAT'S BUTTER

NO

STOP THIS, OBO SAN!
YOU *DARE NOT* REFUSE HIM! CAN YOU NOT SEE HE IS TOUCHED BY THE *DIVINE?*

NO MATTER
I CAN TAKE THE WEAPON FROM A *DEAD MAN'S* HAND JUST AS EASILY AS FROM A *LIVE ONE*
GUARDS

TAKE HIM

IS IT SO EASY TO BRAND ME A TRAITOR, RYLOCH? *YOUR* LOYALTY IS TO THE THRONE

MINE IS TO MY *NATION*

DOWN

OBO SAN

DO NOT MAKE IT WORSE BY *RESISTING*

A TRAITOR'S PUNISHMENT AWAITS YOU

BUT IT CAN BE MERCIFULLY QUICK OR SLOW AND AGONIZING

YOU'RE GOING TO DESTROY THE *GODS*, ARE YOU, OBO SAN?

KILL HIM

AKO?

DOWN

AGAAH!

SHAGA

GH

AIKO

YOU ONLY DOOM YOURSELVES

WE SEND YOUR *BROTHERS* SPIRIT TO THE PURE LAND TODAY

NOT YOURS

COME AWAY

OBO SAN

COME AWAY

TOPOS S WOMAN *DARES* RAISE HIS BLADE TO US?!

SHE IS BUT *ONE* SWORD

KILL THE MONK THEN

HRG

I THINK WE SHOULD LEAVE

WOMAN

NONE OF YOU GO *ANYWHERE*

CUT TOO M DOWN

ALL OF THEM

I CAN'T ALLOW YOU TO LEAVE

RYUICHI

I CAN'T ALLOW YOU TO TAKE THE WEAPON

OBO SAN, STOP!

DO NOT FORCE ME TO DO THIS!

GHHG!

OBO-SAN

WE MUST GO!

WE GO NOW, OBO SAN

OR NOT AT ALL

LEAVE HIM!

OBO SAN FOLLOW WITH

I WILL HOLD THEM

GO!

THEY WON'T GET FAR, MY EMPEROR

THIS I SWEAR TO YOU

BUT I DO WANT THAT WEAPON

GENERAL RYUICHI NOT ONLY HAVE THEY *ESCAPED*

BUT THEY LEFT A GOODLY NUMBER OF MY GUARDS DEAD IN THEIR WAKE

THIS [illegible] NOT *PLEASE* ME

YES, I'M SURE THEY WON'T

I SUPPOSE I CAN AFFORD TO BE PATIENT

I'M ONLY JUST SETTLING IN

OBO SAN

AIKO HAS RETURNED

WE NEED TO BE GOING THE WEATHER'S GOING TO TURN

SHOULD I ASK WHERE YOU GOT THESE HORSES, AIKO?

NOT IF YOU DON'T WANT TO HEAR THE *ANSWER*

I AM INDEBTED TO BOTH YOJI AND WULF FOR YOUR DEEDS ON MY BEHALF

THE DEPTH OF FEELING FOR YOU IS MUCH THE SAME AS IT WAS FOR YOUR BROTHER

OBO SAN, WHAT OF MITSUMUNE?

WE ALL SAW IT, YET HOW IS THIS THING THAT HAPPENED *POSSIBLE?*

NO!

FOR WHAT YOU HAVE *SUFFERED*

BUT YOU NEED NOT DO THIS.

LET THIS *DEATH SENTENCE* BE MINE ALONE

OUR FATES AND YOURS ARE NOW THE *SAME*. NOTHING CAN CHANGE THAT

WE SWORE OUR LOYALTY TO TODOS.

THAT VOW EXTENDS TO *YOU*

I COULD NOT EXPLAIN THE MADNESS THAT GRIPPED HIM THIS *RESURRECTION*

I CANNOT EVEN *BEGIN* TO UNDERSTAND

WHERE DO WE GO NOW?

MY MONASTERY IN THE NORTH. WE'LL BE *SAFE* THERE FOR A TIME

AND AFTER THAT?

AFTER THAT?

NOW
I DON'T

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ON THE PATH...

The monk Obo-san refused to surrender the Weapon of Heaven to Emperor Mitsumune, ruler of Nayado. In a fit of madness, or perhaps sanity, Mitsumune committed ritual suicide and was resurrected, commanding Obo-san's death. Obo-san escaped with the help of his companions, Wulf and Aiko.

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BR N MF MY
GENERAL

GENERAL RYUICHI AS YOU REQUESTED EMPEROR MITSUMONE

SIT

WHAT IS YOUR WISH MY EMPEROR?

YOU SUMMONED ME, MY LORD?

THE REST OF YOU LEAVE US

I WOULD SPEAK TO MY GENERAL IN PRIVATE

RYOKUHI

WE GREW TO MANHOOD TOGETHER, DID WE NOT, RYOKUHI?

YOU

ME

TODOSI

OBO SAN

AND WE HAVE COME TO *THIS*

TODOSI IS DEAD AND OBO SAN HAS FLED IN *DEFIANCE* OF MY WILL

I SEE OBO SAN AT LEAST LEFT YOU SOMETHING TO *REMEMBER* HIM BY

YES MY EMPEROR

AND THERE IS NO SIGN OF HIM SINCE HIS ESCAPE?

NO

HE AND HIS ACCOMPLICES WERE ABLE TO SLIP AWAY INTO THE COUNTRYSIDE

OBO-SAN IS LIKELY TO HEAD *NORTH*, TOWARD HIS MONASTERY

NOT TO HIS HOME IN KOUMA PROVINCE?

OBO SAN IS NOW MORE A CREATURE OF THE *MONASTERY* THAN HIS HOME

OR AT LEAST HE *WAS*

OBO SAN MUST NOT REMAIN *FREE.* RYUICHI

HE DEFIES HIS EMPEROR, AND SUCH DEFIANCE CANNOT BE ALLOWED TO TAKE ROOT OR *REBELLION* WILL FLOURISH

AND THERE IS THE MATTER OF THE WEAPON OF HEAVEN

I *WILL* HAVE IT

IT WILL BE AS YOU COMMAND MY LORD

BUT TAKE THE *WHOLE* OF YOUR ARMY WITH YOU

WHY?

AND [illegible] DECIMATED [illegible] PASSWIT[illegible]

TO SEND AWAY WHAT REMAINS AND LEAVE YAZAKI UNPROTECTED IS TO COURT DISASTER

I BEG OF YOU MITSUMUNE DO NOT DO THIS

SHINACEA WILL NOT ATTACK THEY *COWER* BEFORE THE WEAPON OF HEAVEN

NO

I WON'T BRING DANGER TO HIS MOTHER OR HIS ANCESTRAL ESTATE

DESPITE OUR FRIENDSHIP

OBO-SAN'S DISLOYALTY MUST BE *PUNISHED*

I HAVE GATHERED A SMALL FORCE, *FIFTY* OF MY BEST SAMURAI

OBO-SAN WILL NOT ESCAPE US

WE ARE READY TO LEAVE *NOW*

YES. BY ALL MEANS RYUICHI, LEAVE AT ONCE

TAKE THE ARMY

I WANT A SHOW OF *FORCE*...

AND I WANT OBO-SAN BROUGHT BEFORE ME

HEED ME, RYUICHI

I AM TOUCHED BY THE DIVINE EVEN *DEATH* OBEYS ME

WITH THE WEAPON IN MY POSSESSION SHINACEA WILL HAVE REASON TO FEAR *ME*

THEY'LL SEND RYOCHI AFTER US

THEY'RE PROBABLY HARD ON OUR TRAIL ALREADY

AND RYOCHI KNOWS ME WELL ENOUGH TO KNOW WHERE WE'RE HEADED

AND I BELIEVE YOU GAVE THAT ADDED INCENTIVE TO MY AND L.S.'S WORK

AND WHAT WOULD YOU HAVE HAD ME DO?

LET ALLET YOU DOWN OBO SAN?

WHY DO WE MAKE FOR YOUR MONASTERY OBO SAN IF RYOCHI ALREADY KNOWS THIS IS OUR DESTINATION?

WILL WE NOT BE BETTER SERVED FINDING REFUGE ELSEWHERE?

YOU KNOW WHAT THEY'LL DO

I DO NOT BELIEVE HE WOULD HAVE DONE SO

YOU THINK HE WOULD HAVE STAYED HIS HAND SIMPLY BECAUSE YOU WERE *FRIENDS* AS BOYS?

MITSUMUNE WAS YOUR BOYHOOD FRIEND AS WELL, AND IT'S *HE* WHO ORDERED YOUR EXECUTION

RYOKEN IS MITSUMUNE'S CREATURE OBO-SAN

WHATEVER MITSUMUNE HAS BECOME

DON'T CONCERN YOURSELF WELL

THERE *IS* NO BETTER REFUGE

OBO-SAN?

THE MONASTERY WILL SERVE ITS PURPOSE

IS IT THE *WEAPON* THAT WILL PROTECT US, OBO SAN?

IS *THAT* WHAT YOU INTEND?

I USED THE WEAPON OF HEAVEN TO BANISH THE GODS FROM THE BATTLEFIELD

BUT I UNDERSTAND *LITTLE* OF IT BEYOND THAT

I DON'T KNOW [illegible] IT EVEN *COULD* BE USED FOR THE PURPOSES MUTSOMARU WISHES

SOON WE WON'T BE SO LUCKY

WHEN WORD OF THE PRICE ON OUR HEADS *SPREADS*

EVERYONE WILL BE AN ENEMY

UNFORTUNATELY TRUE

OBO SAN WHAT OF THE *MARA* THE GODS GRANTED YOU?

IT APPEARS WE ARE NOT ALONE ON THIS ROAD

NO

THE MASK WAS GIVEN TO TODOSI, AND PASSED TO ME

IT'S NOTHING I WANTED *THEN* NOTHING I WANT *NOW*

I DO KNOW GIZOWEH WAS [illegible]

THE MASK GIZOWEH

I DO NOT BELIEVE IT PLAYED A PART IN THE RESURRECTION BUT I CANNOT BE SURE

I ONLY KNOW IT WAS GIVEN AS TRIBUTE FOR THE *TRUE* METS MUNT WAS LOOKING AT ME THEN

THE TRUE METSMUNT WANTED TO DO HIS OWN TRADE MORE THAN THAT I

OBO SAN WE

A SHRINE

AS GOOD A PLACE AS ANY TO REST THE HORSES

A BUILDING TO YOU TO MY FATHER THE LIFE UPON WHICH I BUILT MY LIFE

MY BROTHER DEDICATED HIMSELF TO A MARTIAL EXISTENCE BECAUSE HE BELIEVED IT WAS THE BEST WAY TO SERVE NAVAJO

I GAVE MY LIFE OVER TO RELIGION BECAUSE I BELIEVED IN ITS IDEALS AND BECAUSE I BELIEVED MY PIETY SERVED NAVAJO IN ITS OWN WAY

MY *FAITH* WAS THE ENTIRETY OF MY BEING WHEN

AND THEN THE COPS FORSOOK ME

OBO SAN?

I KNOW IN MANY WAYS YOU MUST FEEL

ABANDONED

I UNDERSTAND WHAT THAT IS AS A CHILD I WAS ABANDONED WHEN MY PARENTS AND WHOLE VILLAGE SUCCUMBED TO THE SICKNESS

I HAD NOWHERE TO GO

BUT WHEN I FELT ALMOST LOST AN *ANSWER* PRESENTED ITSELF

YOUR FAMILY TOOK ME IN THE TSOSIAWAS GAVE ME A CHANCE FOR MY LIFE TO HAVE MEANING AND FOR ONE AGAIN

THERE IS A *PATH* FOR YOU OBO SAN

OBI SAN ARE YOU COMING DOWN?

I AM *FINISHED* WITH THESE GODS AND ALL THEIR TRAPPINGS

IT'S JUST A *BUILDING*, OBI SAN

OR MORE TRULY I LOOKED ON *THEM* WHEN I SAW THEM FOR THE PETTY BEINGS THEY TRULY ARE

I WILL HAVE NOTHING MORE TO DO WITH THEM

SAVE TO HAVE MY *VENGEANCE* UPON THEM

SUIT YOURSELF

I'M THIRSTY

AND YOU NEED NOT WALK IT ALONE

THERE ARE OTHERS WHO WILL JOIN YOU

WHEREVER YOU DECIDE YOUR PATH LEADS

WULF WILL STAND WITH YOU

I WILL STAND WITH YOU

BANDITS

HNG!

BANDITS!

HAA!

GHLK!

WHICH OF YOU FIRST?

СУНЬ!
НАА!
АЛЮ

WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO, HOLY MAN?

NNH!

HRRG!

AHN!

STOP!

NNK

GYAAH

AAH?

I'M FINE

THANK YOU

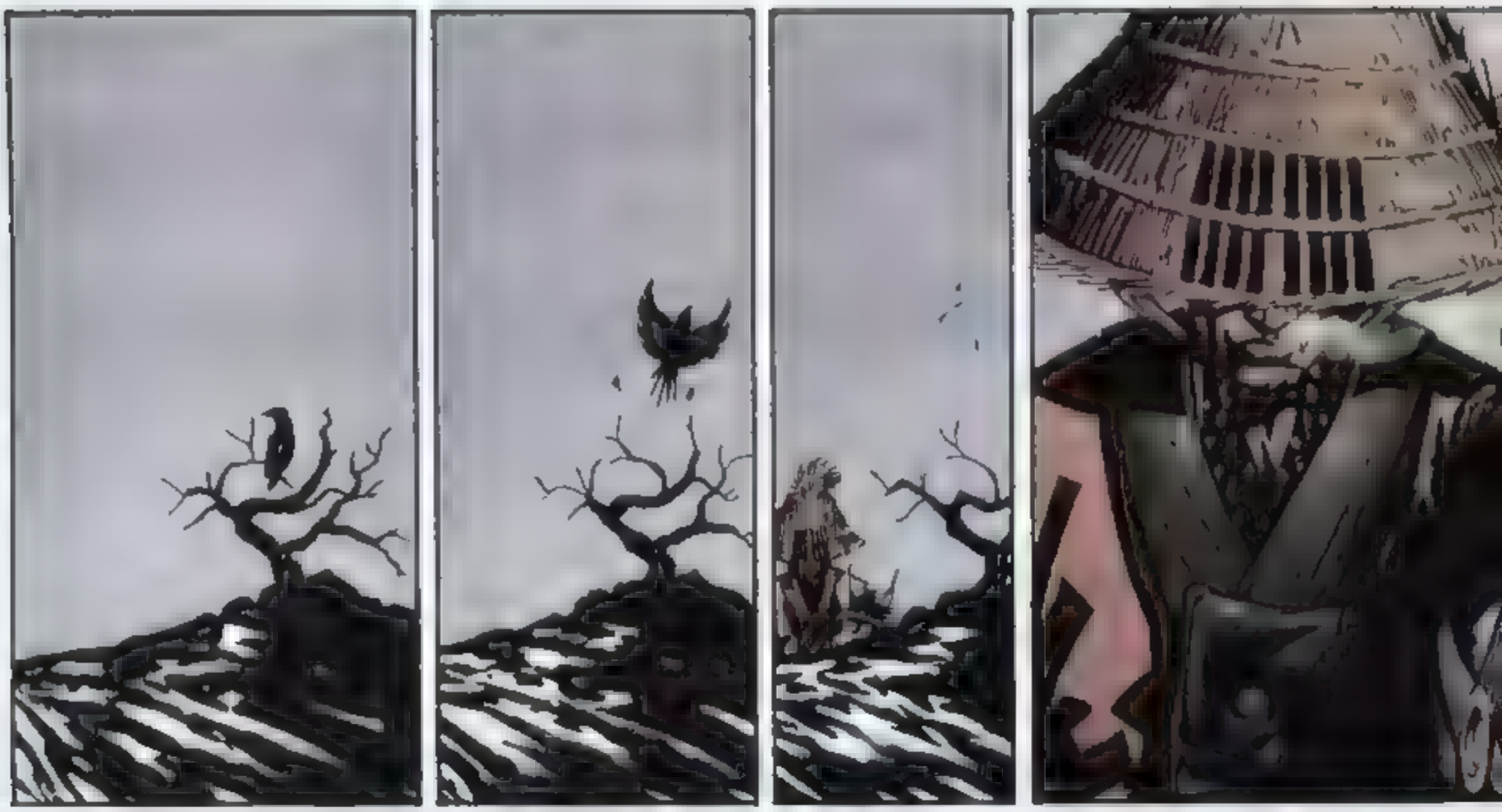
IS THIS *MARA* ...BRO SAN THE *MARA* ARROW ... YOU TO DO THAT

YOU ASKED ALTSE ALONE TO SEE THE TRUTH AND HE *DID*

YOU TO P THE BANDIT *STOP* AND H *DID*

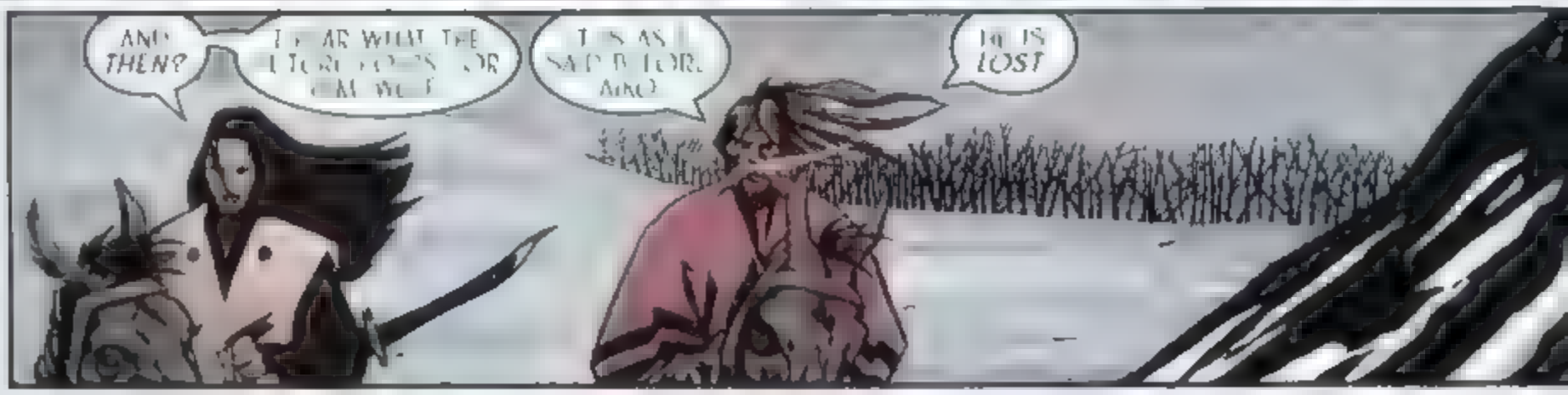
HOW DID YOU DO THAT OBO SAN?
I DON'T KNOW

YOU MAY NOT WANT THIS MARK OF THE GODS
BUT IT GIVES YOU POWER
I
I AM ALIVE BECAUSE OF IT
WE SHOULD GO



SEEKING REFUGE IN A *MONASTERY?*

I HOPE HE AT LEAST ABLE TO GAIN SOME MEASURE OF PEACE THERE HOWEVER FLEETING



HE HASN'T SPOKEN SINCE WE LEFT THE SHRINE

HE'S BURIED HIS BROTHER AND CAST ASIDE HIS FAITH

HE IS BRANDED WITH THE MARK OF THOSE HE HATES

HOW COULD HIS MIND BE ANYTHING *BUT* TURMOIL?

OBO SANS VERY *BEING* IS CONFLICTED HOW ELSE DO YOU EXPLAIN A MAN WHO HAS FORSWORN HIS RELIGION

OBO SAN?

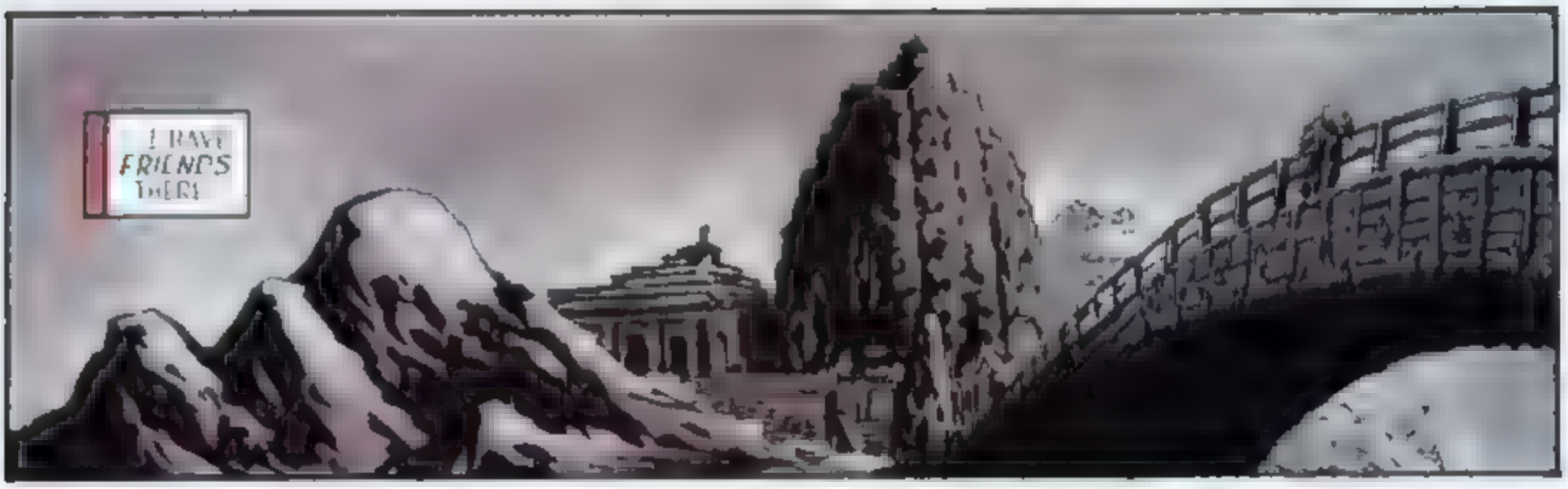
WE'VE ARRIVED

THAT?

OH, I THINK *THAT* WILL DO NICELY

TAKAMIGASHI MONASTERY

THE ISLAND WILL PROTECT US FOR A TIME

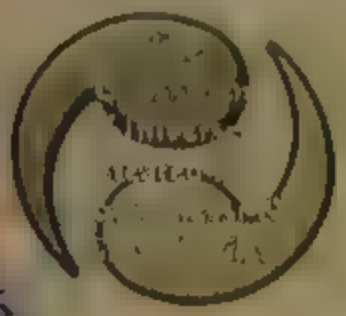

I HAVE
FRIENDS
THERE

MARC SEARLE

PENNINGTON

ARTWORK

AND PAINTS



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ON THE PATH...

The monk Obo-san refused to surrender the Weapon of Heaven to Emperor Mitsumune, ruler of Nayado. In a fit of madness, or perhaps sanity, Mitsumune committed ritual suicide and was resurrected, commanding Obo-san's death. Obo-san and his companions, Wulf and Aiko, escaped to his monastery in the north.

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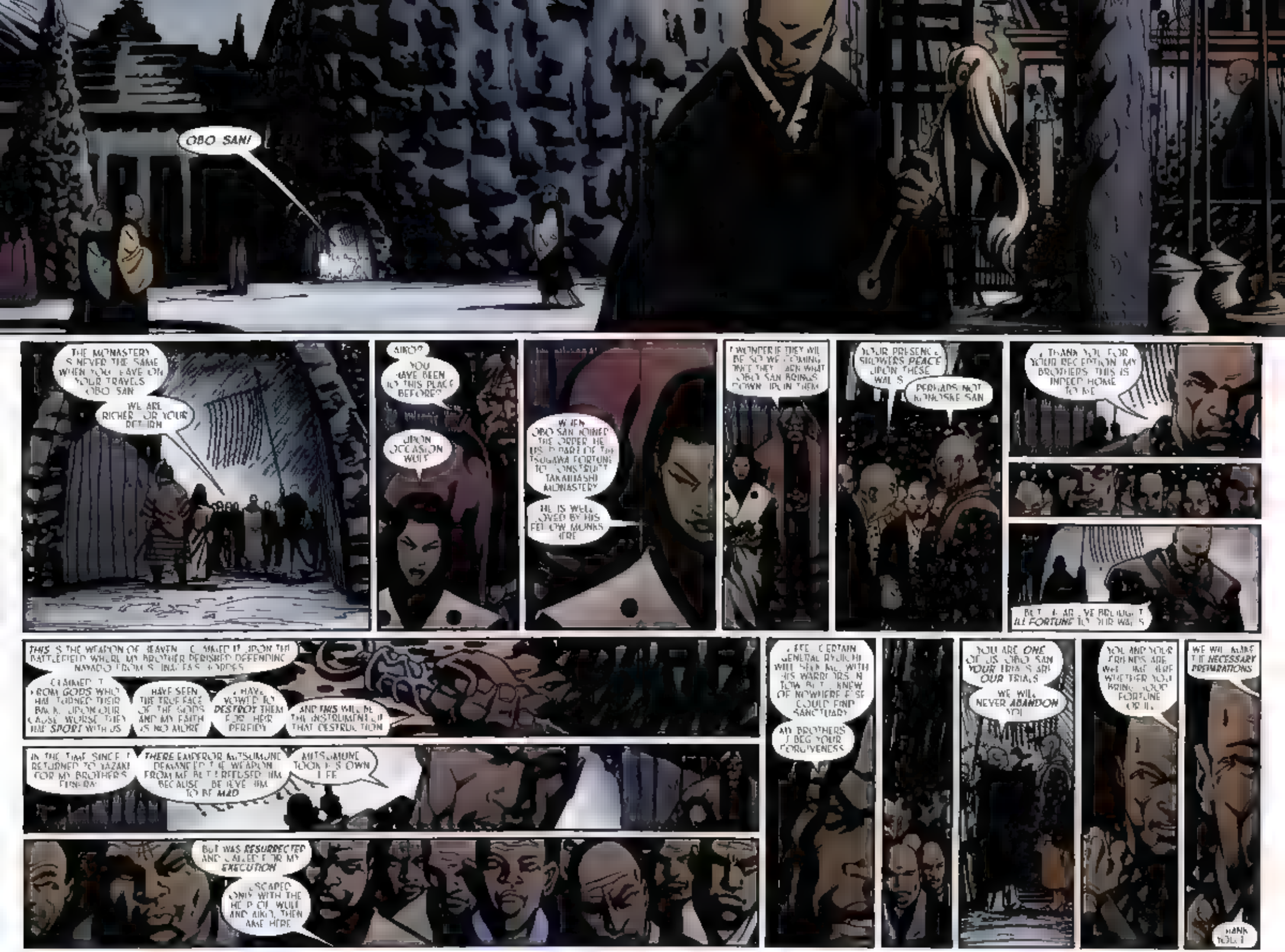

OBO SAN!
THE MONASTERY IS NEVER THE SAME WHEN YOU LEAVE ON YOUR TRAVELS OBO SAN
WE ARE RICHER FOR YOUR RETURN
AIKO?
YOU HAVE BEEN TO THIS PLACE BEFORE?
UPON OCCASION WILL I
WHEN OBO SAN JOINED THE ORDER HE USED PART OF THE TSUGAWA FORTUNE TO CONSTRUCT TAKAHASHI MONASTERY
HE IS WELL LOVED BY HIS FELLOW MONKS HERE
I WONDER IF THEY WILL BE SO WELCOMING WHEN THEY LEARN WHAT OBO SAN BRINGS DOWN UPON THEM
YOUR PRESENCE SHOWERS PEACE UPON THESE WALLS
PERHAPS NOT KOMOSKE SAN
THANK YOU FOR YOUR RECEPTION MY BROTHERS THIS IS INDEED HOME TO ME
BUT I AM LOATH TO BRING ILL FORTUNE TO YOUR WALLS
THIS IS THE WEAPON OF HEAVEN CLAIMED UPON THE BATTLEFIELD WHERE MY BROTHER PERISHED DEFENDING NAYADO FROM SINISTER FORCES
CLAIMED FROM GODS WHO HAD TURNED THEIR BACK UPON OUR CAUSE WORSE THEY HAVE SPORT WITH US
I HAVE SEEN THE TRUE FACE OF THE GODS AND MY FAITH IS NO MORE
I HAVE VOWED TO DESTROY THEM FOR HER PERFIDY
AND THIS WILL BE THE INSTRUMENT OF THAT DESTRUCTION
IN THE TIME SINCE I RETURNED TO NAZAKI FOR MY BROTHERS FUNERAL
THERE EMPEROR MITSUMUNE DEMANDED THE WEAPON FROM ME BUT I REFUSED HIM BECAUSE I BELIEVE HIM TO BE MAD
MITSUMUNE TOOK HIS OWN LIFE
BUT WAS RESURRECTED AND CALLED FOR MY EXECUTION
I ESCAPED ONLY WITH THE HELP OF WILL AND AIKO, THEN ARE HERE
I SEE CERTAIN GENERAL RYUICHI WILL SEND ME WITH HIS WARRIORS IN TOW BUT I KNEW OF NOWHERE ELSE COULD FIND SANCTUARY
MY BROTHERS I BEG YOUR FORGIVENESS
YOU ARE ONE OF US OBO SAN YOUR TRIALS ARE OUR TRIALS
WE WILL NEVER ABANDON YOU
YOU AND YOUR FRIENDS ARE WELCOME HERE WHETHER YOU BRING GOOD FORTUNE OR ILL
WE WILL MAKE THE NECESSARY PREPARATIONS
THANK YOU!

OBO-SAN!

OBO-SAN!

WULF

DON T

I'M GLAD TO SEE YOU TOO, YAMA, BUT YOU HAVE TO PUT ME DOWN NOW

OBO SAN, WHAT TRANSPIRES HERE?

THIS IS *YAMA* HE LIVES HERE

I ASSURE YOU, WULF, HE PRESENTS NO MORE THREAT TO ME THAN WOULD A KITTEN

YAMA, THIS IS MY FRIEND WULF

WULF!

WULF! WULF!

Uh

NO. THAT'S ALL RIGHT

WULF

OBO SAN ?

IS SIMPLE

YAMA WAS A SUMO, QUITE A SUCCESSFUL ONE

BUT HE REFUSED TO THROW A HEAVILY WAGERED MATCH AND GANGSTERS *BEAT* HIM. HIS BRAIN WAS DAMAGED

WE TOOK HIM IN AND HE HAS STAYED WITH US HERE EVER SINCE

OBO-SAN, THERE IS SOMEONE YOU SHOULD MEET

PARTICULARLY IF YOU STRUGGLE WITH YOUR *FAITH*

THIS IS KATAYAMA SOJIROU

HE IS NEWLY ARRIVED FROM TANAKA PROVINCE IN THE SOUTH

I AM PLEASED TO MEET YOU, OBO SAN

I CAME HERE *HOPING* I WOULD HAVE A CHANCE TO DO SO

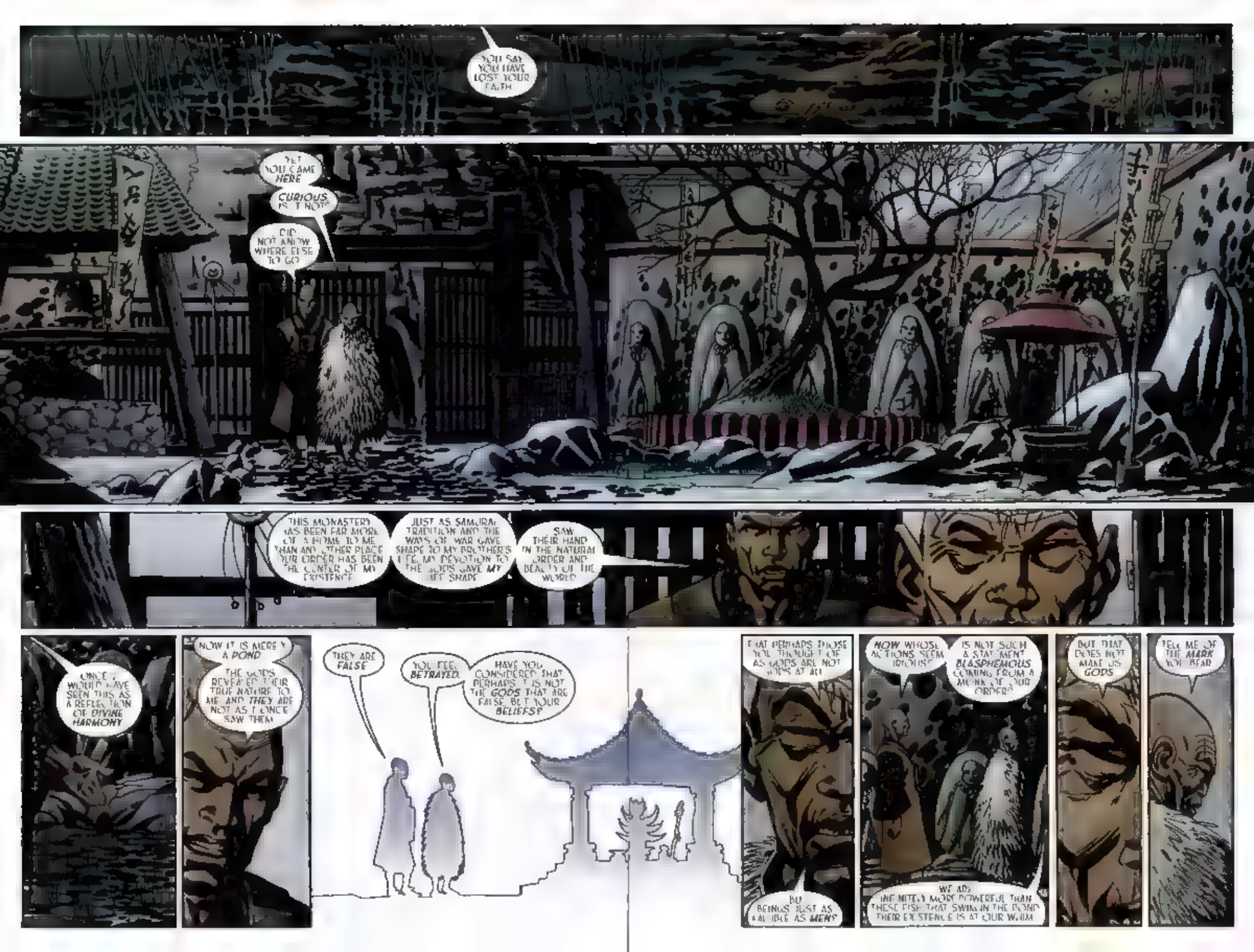
TRULY?

WHY SO, SOJIROU SAN?

THERE'S MUCH WE SHOULD DISCUSS, OBO-SAN

YOUR COMPANIONS MUST BE ROAD WEARY. WE SHOULD LET THEM REST

COME. WALK WITH ME


YOU SAY YOU HAVE LOST YOUR FAITH
YET YOU CAME HERE
CURIOUS, IS IT NOT?
DID NOT KNOW WHERE ELSE TO GO
THIS MONASTERY HAS BEEN FAR MORE OF A HOME TO ME THAN ANY OTHER PLACE OUR ORDER HAS BEEN THE CENTER OF MY EXISTENCE
JUST AS SAMURAI TRADITION AND THE WAYS OF WAR GAVE SHAPE TO MY BROTHER'S LIFE, MY DEVOTION TO THE GODS GAVE MY LIFE SHAPE
SAW THEIR HAND IN THE NATURAL ORDER AND BEAUTY OF THE WORLD
ONCE I WOULD HAVE SEEN THIS AS A REFLECTION OF DIVINE HARMONY
NOW IT IS MERELY A POND
THE GODS REVEALED THEIR TRUE NATURE TO ME AND THEY ARE NOT AS I ONCE SAW THEM
THEY ARE FALSE
YOU FEEL BETRAYED
HAVE YOU CONSIDERED THAT PERHAPS IT IS NOT THE GODS THAT ARE FALSE, BUT YOUR BELIEFS?
THAT PERHAPS THOSE YOU THOUGHT OF AS GODS ARE NOT GODS AT ALL
BUT BEINGS JUST AS FALLIBLE AS MEN?
HOW WHOSE ACTIONS SEEM IDIOTIC?
IS NOT SUCH A STATEMENT BLASPHEMOUS COMING FROM A MONK OF YOUR ORDER?
WE ARE INFINITELY MORE POWERFUL THAN THESE FISH THAT SWIM IN THE POND. THEIR EXISTENCE IS AT OUR WHIM
BUT THAT DOES NOT MAKE US GODS
TELL ME OF THE MARK YOU BEAR

HOW CAN *YOU* KNOW OF IT?

I DID NOT MENTION IT WITHIN

I KNOW *MANY* THINGS

IT GIVES ME A POWER *DIFFERENT* THAN THE MIGHT IT GAVE MY BROTHER UPON THE FIELD OF BATTLE

ON THE JOURNEY HERE WE WERE ACCOSTED BY BANDITS I COMMANDED ONE OF THEM TO *STOP*, AND HE DID

HE COULD NOT DISOBEY MY WILL

IT'S NOT THE *POWER* I QUESTION I QUESTION WHAT YOU WILL *DO* WITH IT

YOU CANNOT HIDE HERE FOREVER

NO!

SO THEN WHAT WILL YOU *DO*?

WHAT HAS BEEN PUT IN MOTION WILL NOT *EASILY* BE PUT TO REST

EASIER TO CATCH *SMOKE*

SET ADRIFT ON THE AIR

YOU SPEAK OF *REVENGE* AGAINST THE GODS, OBO-SAN BUT HOW WILL YOU ACCOMPLISH SUCH A THING?

WHERE WILL YOU *FIND* THESE *GODS* TO PUNISH THEM?

PERHAPS YOUR CONCERNS SHOULD BE OF A MORE *EARTHLY* NATURE

YOU BELIEVE THE EMPEROR IS *MAD*, DO YOU NOT?

THAT MITSUMUNE IS NOT THE SAME MAN YOU KNEW ESPECIALLY AFTER HIS RESURRECTION?

YOU MUST DECIDE WHETHER YOU WILL STAND IDLE WHILE HE CONTINUES PLACING NAYADO AT RISK

OR IF YOU HAVE THE COURAGE TO USE YOUR GIFTS TO *TOPPLE* MITSUMUNE

FORGIVE ME FOR INTERRUPTING, OBO-SAN

BUT RYUICHI HAS ARRIVED

I *SEE*, YET I STILL DO NOT BELIEVE THE ENTIRETY OF NAYADO'S ARMY ARRAYED BEFORE US

MEANING YAZAKI STANDS UNPROTECTED

MITSUMUNE TRULY *MUST* BE MAD

SUCH A FORCE COULD *EASILY* OVERWHELM US WHY DOES RYUICHI NOT ATTACK?

LOOK THERE

RYUICHI HIMSELF UNDER A FLAG OF TRUCE

OBO-SAN YOU'RE NOT *GOING* TO H.M. ARE YOU?

HOW ELSE WILL I KNOW WHAT HE WANTS?

BUT HE TRIED TO *KILL* YOU

TRUE

BUT HE DID NOT SUCCEED

RYU CHI

OBO SAN

MY APOLOGIES FOR THE INJURIES YOU SUFFERED

IT WAS NOT MY INTENT

I APPRECIATE YOUR CONCERN

SO TO WHAT DO I OWE THE PLEASURE OF YOUR VISIT?

PLEASE DO NOT MAKE THIS MORE DIFFICULT THAN IT NEED BE OBO SAN

WILL YOU SIT?

YOU *KNOW* WHY I AM HERE

THE EMPEROR HAS SENT ME TO RETRIEVE THE WEAPON OF HEAVEN *AND* YOUR HEAD

WHY WOULD MITSUMUNE NEED *MY* HEAD WHEN HE HAS ONE OF HIS *OWN* HE SO RECENTLY BECAME ATTACHED TO?

MUST YOU MAKE LIGHT, OBO SAN?

ONCE YOU WERE TSUGAWA NOBUYUKI WE WERE AS BROTHERS WHEN WE WERE BOYS

YOU WERE RAISED IN THE SAMURAI WAY AS WAS YOUR *BROTHER*, AS WAS I. YOU UNDERSTAND *HONOR*

AND YOU UNDERSTAND MY HONOR IS DEARER TO ME THAN MY OWN. THE HONOR DEMANDS I FULFILL MY DUTY TO MY EMPEROR

SURRENDER THE WEAPON OF HEAVEN TO ME

I REFUSED YOUR REQUEST AT YAZAKI
I MUST REFUSE NOW
OBO-SAN
IF YOU GIVE ME THE WEAPON I WILL ALLOW YOU TO FLEE
YOU NEED NEVER BE *SEEN* AGAIN
I WILL RETURN TO MITSUMUNE
I WILL TELL HIM YOU WERE *SLAIN* AND YOUR BODY LOST
I AM OFFERING YOU YOUR *LIFE*, OBO SAN AND THOSE OF ALL YOUR COMPANIONS
IF ONLY YOU WILL SURRENDER THE WEAPON.
I CANNOT
TO DO SO WOULD BE TO GIVE A MADMAN THE TOOL TO DESTROY OUR NATION
WHY MUST YOU BE THIS WAY?!
DOES *HONOR* MEAN NOTHING TO YOU?
LOYALTY?
I MUST DO AS MY HEART WILLS AND MY CONSCIENCE DICTATES
I MUST DO WHAT I BELIEVE IS BEST FOR NAYADO
THEN YOU LEAVE ME WITH NO CHOICE BUT TO *TAKE* THE WEAPON
DO YOU *SEE* THE ARMY AT MY BACK, OBO-SAN?
YOU BRING YOUR *DOOM* UPON YOURSELF AND ALL WITHIN.
YOU FORCE ME TO GIVE THE ORDER AND *MARCH* UPON YOUR MONASTERY
YOU WILL DO WHAT YOU MUST
AS WILL I
GOODBYE RYOICHI
I AM *PAINED* THAT IT MUST BE SO
AND *I* AM PAINED THAT WE ARE BROUGHT TO THIS OVER A SCRAP OF METAL NO BIGGER THAN A CHILD'S BLADE
MY OLD FRIEND
IS THAT ALL YOU BELIEVE THIS IS ABOUT?
READY THE TROOPS!

PREPARE TO LAY SIEGE

FOR *THIS* YOU INTERRUPT MY RETREAT?

I TOLD YOU TO BRING ME THE *WEAPON OF HEAVEN.*

AND INSTEAD YOU DELIVER A DEAD MAN'S *SKULL.*

YOU HAVE BEEN USEFUL TO ME IN THE PAST YUKIO...

BUT THERE ARE TIMES WHEN I DON'T KNOW WHY I ALLOW YOU TO CONTINUE TO SERVE ME

THE SKULL OF TODOSU WILL HAVE ITS USES IN THE FUTURE, MASTER.

I WAS UNABLE TO OBTAIN THE WEAPON FOR YOU. BUT THE *INFORMATION* I GAVE YOU IS OF USE, IS IT NOT?

YES, YES, I SUPPOSE

GREAT SHINACEA AGAIN FINDS ITSELF PRESENTED WITH OPPORTUNITIES...

OPPORTUNITIES TO *DEVOUR* NAYADO

MITSUMUNE'S *RESURRECTION* IS DISQUIETING BUT THAT CAN BE DEALT WITH IN ITS OWN TIME

I THINK PERHAPS, MATTERS HAVE WORKED OUT *BEST* THIS WAY

THE MONK ESCAPES WITH THE WEAPON OF HEAVEN

THE MAD MITSUMUNE SENDS HIS ENTIRE ARMY NORTH AFTER HIM

AND YAZAKI IS LEFT *UNGUARDED* AND RIPE FOR THE PLUCKING.

WITHOUT THE WEAPON OF HEAVEN TO PROTECT THE CAPITAL, YAZAKI HAS *NO HOPE* OF DEFENDING ITSELF.

I WILL SEND MY ARMY ACROSS THE SEA. AND I WILL BE EMPEROR NOT ONLY OF SHINACEA, BUT OF *NAYADO* AS WELL.

THEN WE SHALL SEE HOW MANY TIMES MITSUMUNE CAN BE KILLED BEFORE HE *DOESN'T* COME BACK

YOU WILL GO TO THE MONASTERY FOR ME, YUKIO, AND RETURN WITH THE WEAPON OF HEAVEN FROM THIS MONK

BRING *OTHERS* IF YOU MUST.

YOU CAN *DO* THIS?

YES, MASTER

IT WILL BE DONE

MOST EXCELLENT

WHEN ALL THIS HAS COME TO PASS, I WILL HOLD A WEAPON THE GODS THEMSELVES FEAR

AND NAYADO WILL BE *CRUSHED* ONCE AND FOR ALL

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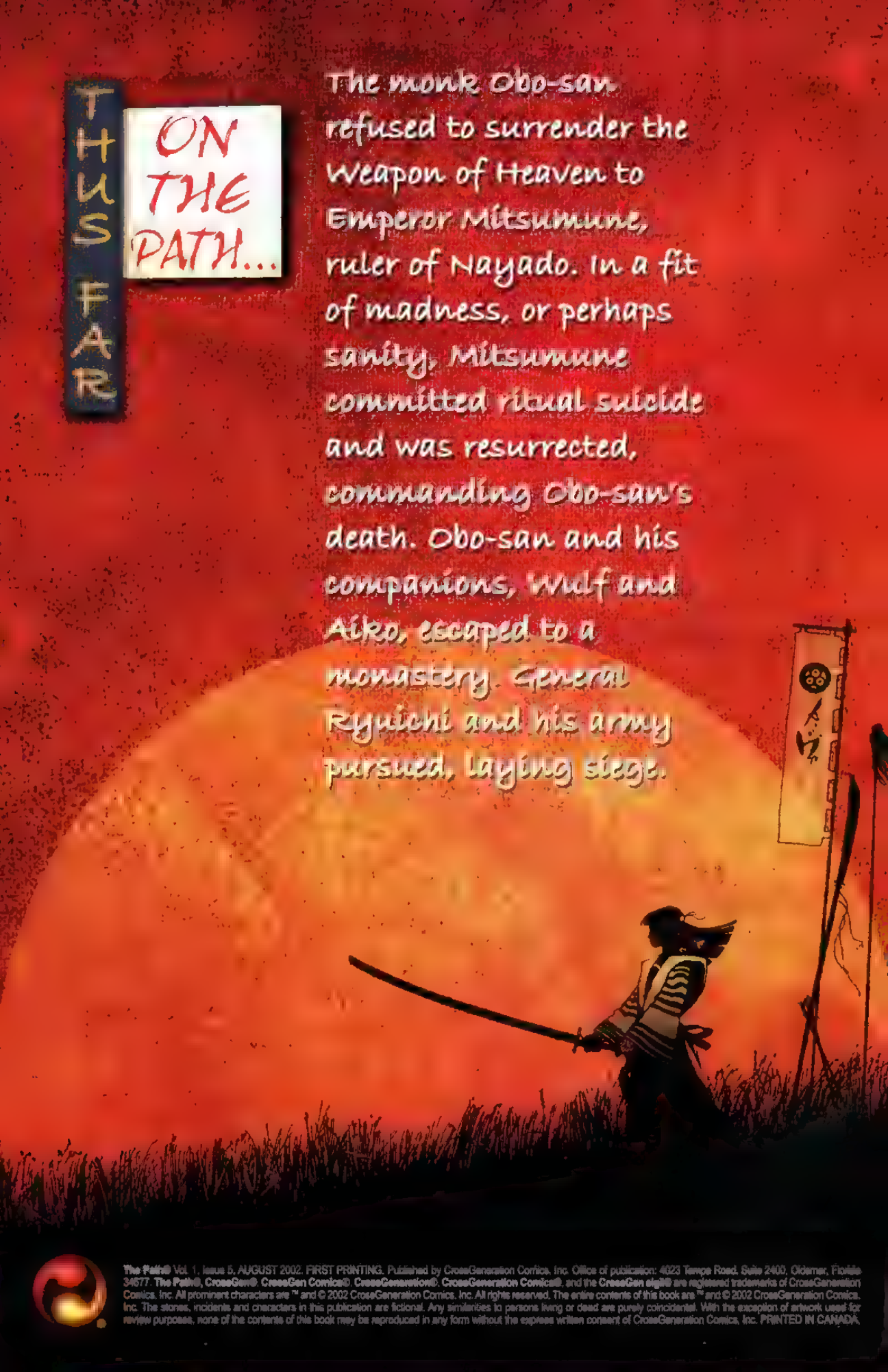

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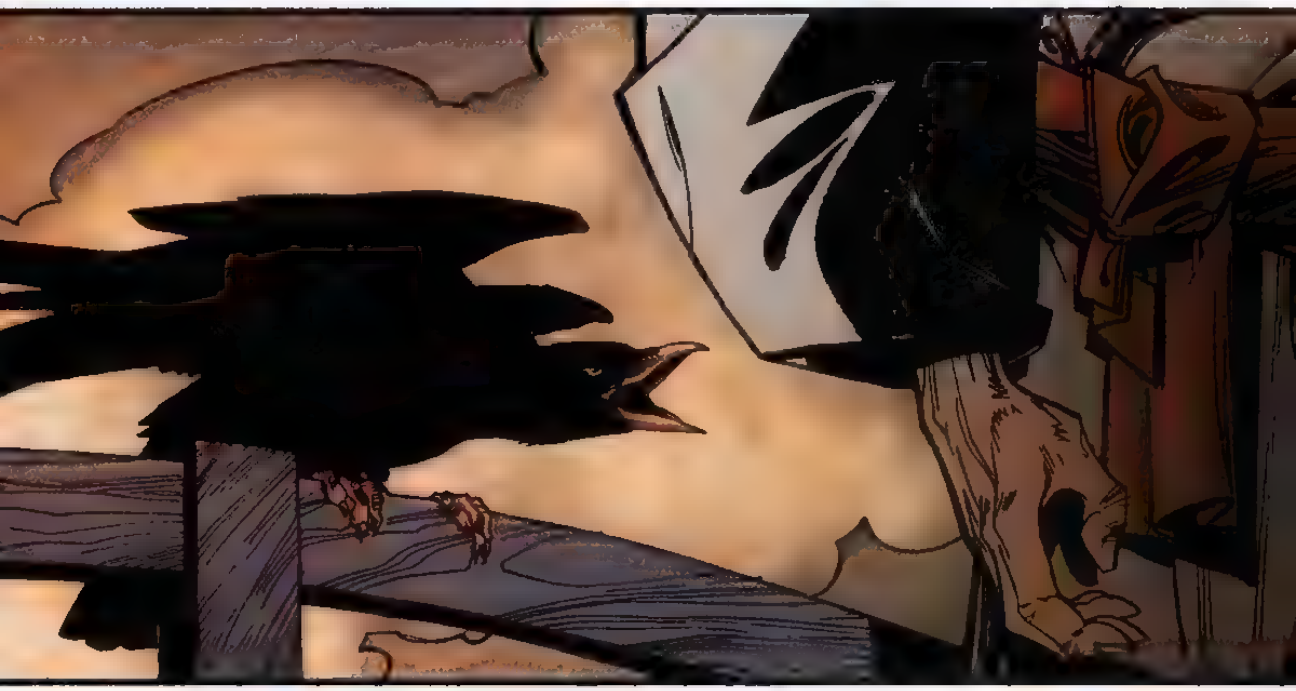
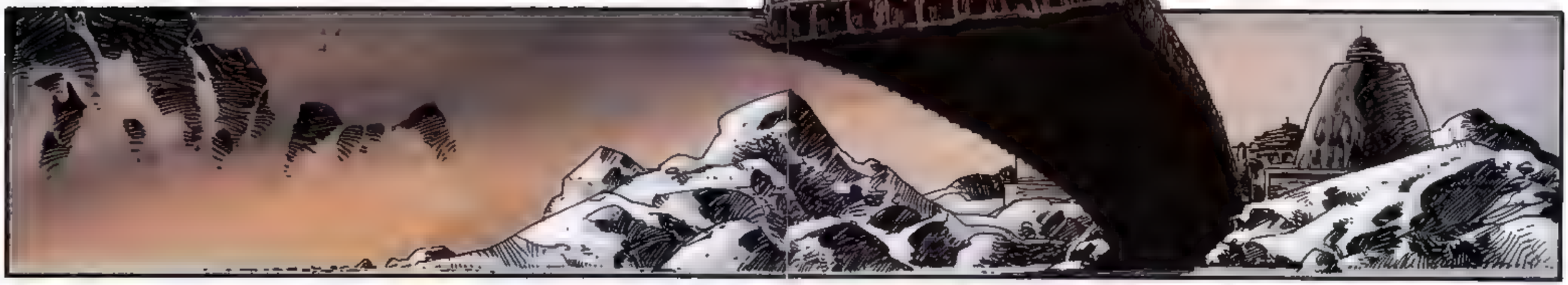
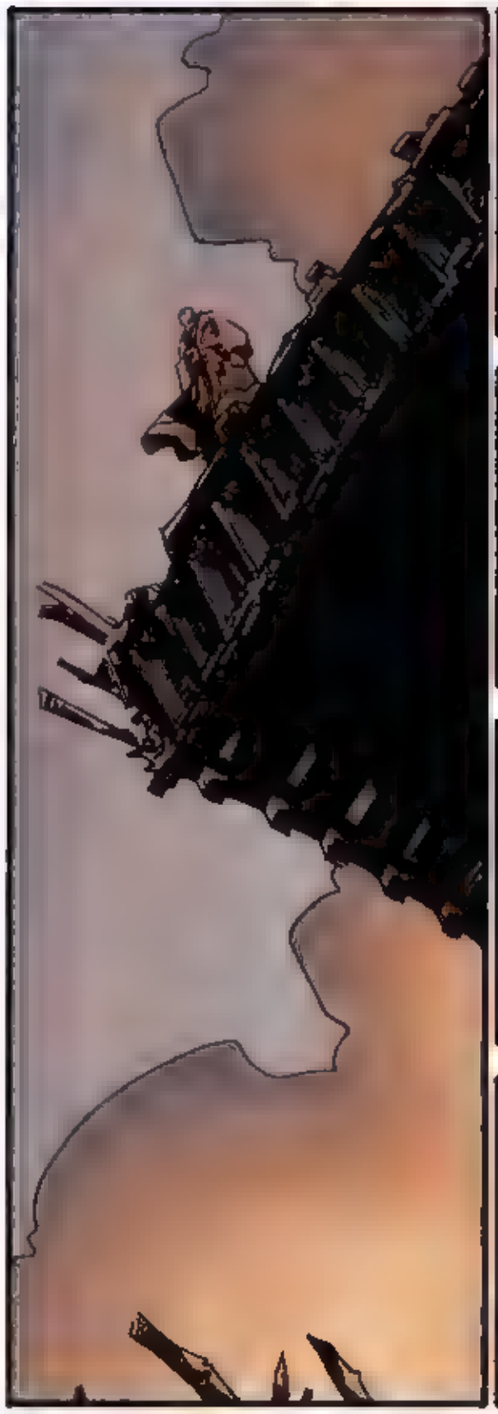
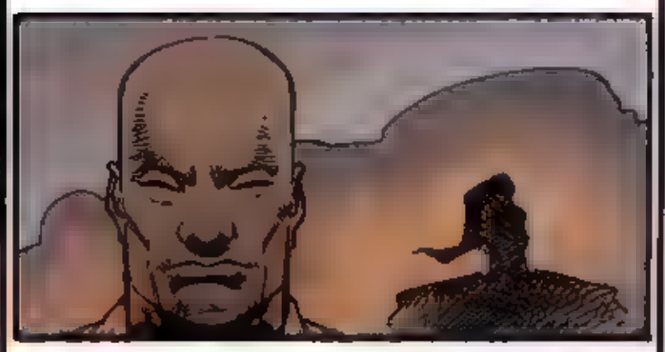


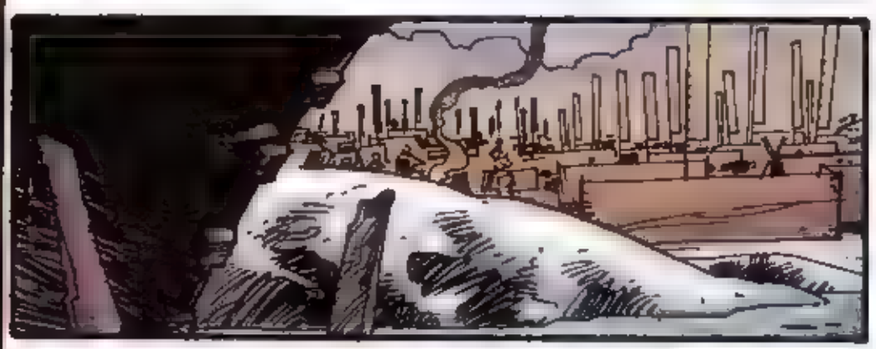


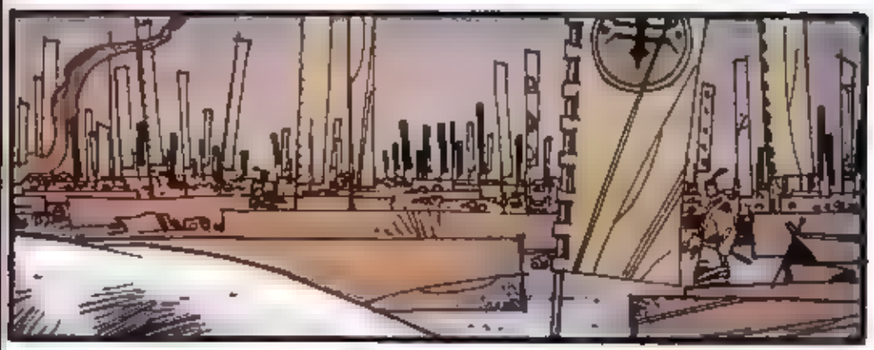




ANYTHING?
NO

RYUICHI STILL SLEEPS





YOU REALIZE DESTROYING THE *BRIDGE* WON'T STOP RYUICHI'S ARMY FOR LONG, OBO-SAN

THEY'LL START FELLING TREES TO MAKE LAUNCHES.

THEY *WILL* REACH THE ISLAND

THAT IS LIKELY SO.

IT IS *ABSOLUTELY* SO.

RYUICHI OFFERED TO SPARE YOU AND YOU REFUSED HIM. NOW THERE IS NO OTHER PATH FOR HIM TO TAKE

RYUICHI IS THE EMPEROR'S TOO.

AND HE WILL PLACE HIS *DUTY* ABOVE ALL ELSE *INCLUDING* YOUR FRIENDSHIP

HIS ARMY MUST OUTNUMBER THE MONKS WITHIN THE MONASTERY TEN TO ONE

I IMAGINE THE NUMBER IS CLOSER TO TWENTY

JEST IF YOU WILL, OBO-SAN.

THIS WILL END IN BLOOD AND DEATH.

IT NEED NOT END IN *YOUR* DEATH, WULF

YOURS *OR* AIKO'S

I HAVE TOLD YOU BEFORE, THIS IS NOT YOUR BATTLE

YOU AND AIKO COULD STEAL AWAY FROM THE MONASTERY...

AND BE *GONE* BEFORE WHAT IS TO COME

AND I HAVE TOLD YOU BEFORE, MY LOYALTY *WAS* TO YOUR BROTHER, *NOW* IT IS TO YOU

I STAY

WHAT *WAS* IT BETWEEN YOU AND TODOSI?

HE NEVER SHARED THE WHOLE OF THE TALE WITH ME WHEN HE BROUGHT YOU TO OUR HOME.

YOUR BROTHER GAVE ME MY *LIFE*

MY PEOPLE HAIL FROM THE OTHER SIDE OF THE WORLD.

A NORTHLAND OF HARSH MOUNTAINS AND FJORDS

WHERE WE PRAY TO WILD GODS

AND LIVE IN VILLAGES CARVED FROM THE ROCKY SHORES

WE ARE SEA ROVERS, TAKING WHAT WE WOULD AND FACING WHAT DANGERS THE SEA WOULD PLACE IN OUR PATH

MINE WAS A PROUD CLAN.

WHEN I WAS BARELY A MAN, MY FATHER DIED IN BATTLE, AS BEFITS A WARRIOR, THE BODIES OF HIS ENEMIES PILED AT HIS FEET

LEADERSHIP PASSED TO THE ELDEST, MY BROTHER JARL. I STOOD AT HIS SIDE WHILE HE LED US ON OUR RAIDS IN LONGSHIPS CROWNED WITH FIERCE CARVINGS.

UPON ONE OF OUR JOURNEYS WE SACKED AND BURNED A RIVAL'S CASTLE

A FORTRESS MY PEOPLE HAD BEEN UNABLE TO CONQUER SINCE THE TIME OF MY FATHER'S FATHER'S FATHER

JARL CLAIMED OUR ENEMY'S DAUGHTER, *LORRIDE*, FOR HIS OWN, AND BROUGHT HER TO OUR HOMELAND, INTENDING TO MAKE HER HIS BRIDE

BUT THE SON OF OUR KING WAS JEALOUS, AND CHALLENGED JARL FOR THE MAIDEN

FEW HAD EVER STOOD AGAINST MY BROTHER, WHO WAS TRULY AMONG THE MIGHTIEST OF OUR PEOPLE

HE STRUCK DOWN THE PRINCE AND KEPT THE WOMAN FOR HIMSELF

KING HARALD'S ANGER WAS GREAT

YET HE DARED NOT EXECUTE MY BROTHER FOR FEAR OF SPARKING WAR AMONGST OUR PEOPLE, FOR JARL WAS WELL-LOVED

INSTEAD, HE BANISHED JARL FROM OUR HOMELAND, VOWING HIS DEATH SHOULD HE RETURN

I PLEDGED MY LOYALTY TO MY BROTHER, AS DID MANY OF THOSE WHO HAD PLUNDERED WITH HIM, AND WE SAILED FROM OUR HOME WITH THE WIND AT OUR BACKS

WE RAIDED AS WE ALWAYS HAD, [redacted] OUR STORES AS NEEDED

WITHOUT A HOME TO CALL US BACK WE VENTURED FAR, LEAVING BEHIND ANY SHORES WE RECOGNIZED

OUR JOURNEY WAS THE STUFF OF EPIC POEM, BUT WE HAD NONE SAVE OURSELVES TO LISTEN TO THE TALE

WE TRAVERSED STRANGE SEAS WHERE SAVAGE STORMS BATTERED US LORRIDE WHO HAD BEEN THE START OF IT ALL, WAS SWEPT OVERBOARD AND LOST

WHEN THE SEA CALMED WE FOUND OURSELVES ADRIFT, MORE DISTANT FROM OUR HOMELAND THAN ANY OF MY PEOPLE HAD EVER SAILED

LONG WEEKS PASSED AND WE VERGED UPON STARVATION UNTIL A ROCKY SHORELINE LOOMED UP BEFORE US WE LANDED AND MADE CAMP FEASTING UPON THE PLENTIFUL GAME

JARL BELIEVED WE HAD DISCOVERED A LAND THAT WE COULD MAKE OUR HOME

BUT WE WERE NOT WELCOME

WE MET THEM WITH SWORDS DRAWN. BUT WE COULD NOT WITHSTAND THEIR ATTACK. EVEN OUR SHIELD WALL WAS BROKEN

STRANGE WARRIORS IN GREAT POLISHED ARMOR DESCENDED UPON US SPEAKING A TONGUE WHOLLY WITHOUT MEANING TO OUR EARS

JARL FOUGHT WITH THE FEROCITY OF TEN.

YET SOON ONLY MY BROTHER AND I STILL DREW BREATH

I KNOW NOW OUR ATTACKERS WERE OF THE NOGAWA CLAN UPON WHOSE TERRITORY WE HAD LANDED HE WHO LED THEM DISMOUNTED AND FOUGHT JARL SHATTERING MY BROTHER'S BLADE AND SLAYING HIM

DESPITE MY OWN WOUNDS, I CUT MY WAY TO THE NOGAWA'S MOUNT AND FLED

I WAS NOT MOVED BY COWARDICE I DID NOT FEAR DEATH, AND INDEED I DID INTEND TO DIE THAT DAY

BUT I WOULD DIE IN A PLACE OF MY CHOOSING, A NARROW PLACE WHERE MY ATTACKERS COULD ONLY COME AT ME SINGLY A PLACE WHERE MY BLADE WOULD DRINK LONG AND DEEP

I WOULD AVENGE MY BROTHER, AND THEN DIE AS HE AND MY FATHER HAD, PASSING INTO THE ALL FATHER'S HALL WITH MY ENEMIES PILED AT MY FEET

THE NOGAWAS ADVANCED AND I SLEW EACH ONE AS HE CAME

THEY FOUND A WAY TO ATTACK ME SO THAT I FACED TWO BLADES AT ONCE

I SAW MY DEATH WAS LIKELY UPON ME

AND REGRETTED ONLY THAT I WOULD BE UNABLE TO HAVE MY VENGEANCE UPON JARL'S SLAYER

BUT RESCUE CAME IN THE FORM OF AN ARROW THAT FELLED ONE OF MY ATTACKERS, NEARLY SPLITTING HIS SKULL

MY SAVIOR ARRIVED ON HORSEBACK LOOSING A FLURRY OF ARROWS THAT TOOK MOST OF THE NOGAWAS YOUR BROTHER, OF COURSE

I DID NOT UNDERSTAND WHY I HAD BEEN SAVED AT THE TIME I SAW NOTHING TO INDICATE TODOSI WAS ANY DIFFERENT THAN THOSE WHO HAD ATTACKED ME

I THOUGHT PERHAPS HE HAD SIMPLY TAKEN THE SIDE OF THE UNDERDOG, AND THAT WAS TRUE

BUT IT WAS MORE THE LONG STANDING ANIMOSITY BETWEEN YOUR FAMILY AND THE NOGAWAS THAT HAD SPARED ME

MY BROTHER'S KILLER FACED ME MY BLADE WAS NO MATCH FOR HIS *DOTANUKI*, THIS I KNEW

THE NOGAWA CLEAVED MY BLADE AS I EXPECTED HIM TO

BUT I DREW HIM CLOSE

AND DROVE THE SHATTERED REMAINDER THROUGH A SEAM IN HIS ARMOR

YOUR BROTHER HAD ALLOWED ME TO AVENGE MY OWN

WE HAD NO COMMON TONGUE YET WE RECOGNIZED IN EACH OTHER A FELLOW WARRIOR OF HONOR

IN SILENCE, HE HELPED ME GATHER MY DEAD AND PLACE THEM IN OUR LONGBOAT

AND THEN, AS IS OUR CUSTOM SET IT TO SEA ABLAZE

I WAS ALONE IN A LAND STRANGER THAN ANY I COULD HAVE IMAGINED, BUT TODOSI GAVE ME A HOME

HE TOOK ME TO KOJIMA

TO THE ESTATE OF YOUR FAMILY

AND TAUGHT ME YOUR LANGUAGE, YOUR CUSTOMS, THE WAYS OF THE WARRIORS OF NAYADO

HE SHARED THESE THINGS WITH ME, EVEN THOUGH HE HAD NO REASON TO DO SO

TODOSI SCHOOLED ME UNTIL I WAS ABLE TO DUEL HIM TO A DRAW, HIS SPEED COUNTERED BY MY STRENGTH.

OR THAT IS WHAT HE LED ME TO BELIEVE

HE PRESENTED ME WITH MY ARMOR AND SWORD AND NAMED ME HIS LIEUTENANT, IGNORING THE SCANDAL CAUSED BY NAYADO'S WARLORD SO ENTRUSTING A BARBARIAN

ON THE BATTLEFIELD, HIS DECISION WAS NEVER QUESTIONED. TO STAND BESIDE TODOSI WAS TO HAVE MY OWN BROTHER AT MY BACK. ALL OF NAYADO'S ENEMIES FELL TO OUR BLADES

THUS DID I BECOME SAMURAI

I HAD INTENDED TO *DIE* THE DAY I MET YOUR BROTHER AND BURIED MY OWN.

PERHAPS I DID.

FOR I WAS *REBORN* AS YOU SEE ME NOW

THIS LIFE WAS GIVEN TO ME BY TODOSI

NOW THAT HE IS GONE, ALL THAT I OWE TO *HIM* I OWE TO *YOU*.

LOYALTY TO *MY* BROTHER LED ME TO THESE SHORES

LOYALTY TO *YOUR* BROTHER LED ME TO THIS CAUSE

AND MY LOYALTY TO *YOU* WILL KEEP ME HERE AS LONG AS I DRAW BREATH, OBO-SAN

WHATEVER IS TO COME

YOUR SATCHEL COULD WELL HOLD THE MEANS TO OUR VICTORY YOU *KNOW* THAT

RYUICHI'S ARMY IS SIZABLE

BUT I DOUBT IT COULD WITHSTAND WHAT YOU POSSESS

TRUE

THE WEAPON OF HEAVEN LIKELY COMMANDS ENOUGH MIGHT TO *DRIVE AWAY* RYUICHI

PERHAPS EVEN TO DESTROY HIM

BUT I WILL NOT USE IT AGAINST NAYADO'S SONS

IT IS A FOUL THING OF EVIL GODS, I SAID. IT WILL BE USED ONLY AGAINST *THEM*, AND I WILL HOLD TO MY VOW

OBO-SAN!

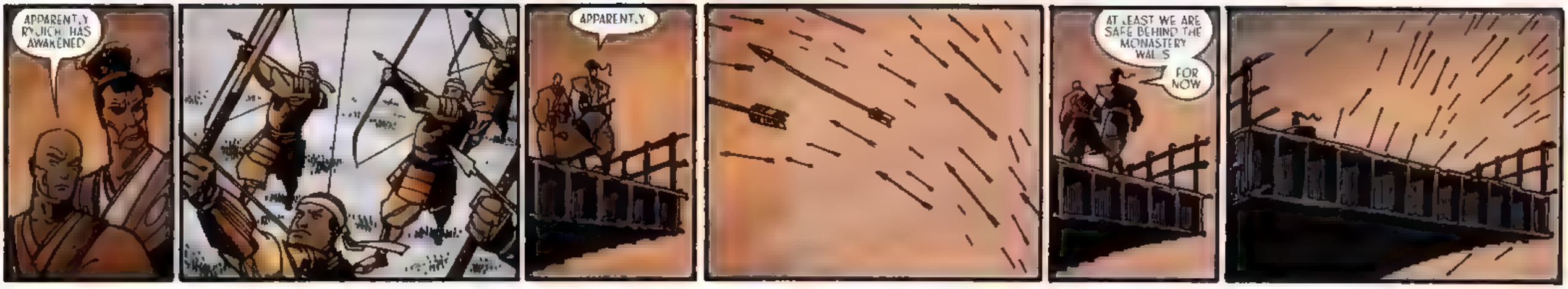
AWAY WITH YOU

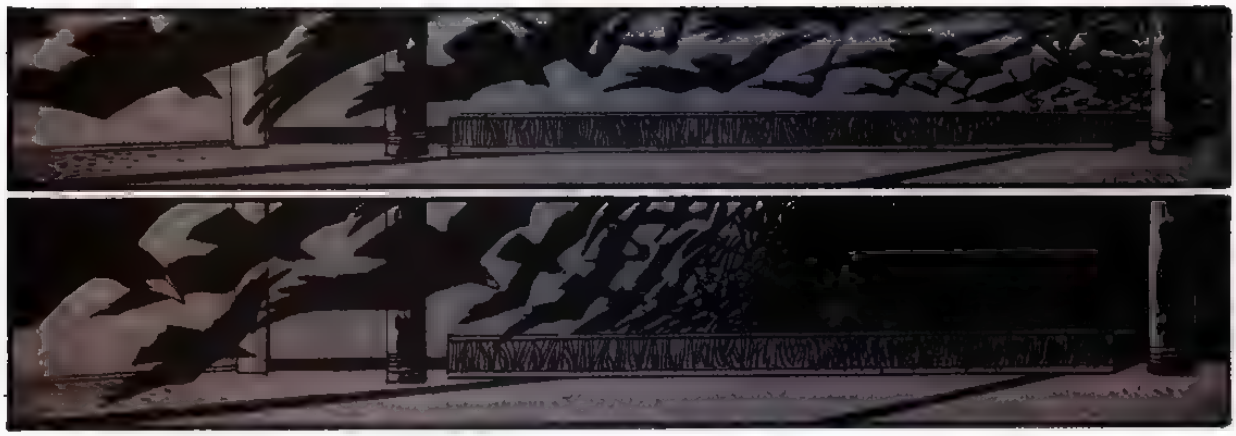
DAMNED ARROGANCE

MY PEOPLE BELIEVE SUCH BIRDS ARE AN ILL OMEN, OBO SAN DO NOT IGNORE PORTENTS WHEN THEY PRESENT THEMSELVES

YOU FORGET, WULF

I NO LONGER BELIEVE IN *ANYTHING*


APPARENTLY RYUICHI HAS AWAKENED
APPARENTLY
AT LEAST WE ARE SAFE BEHIND THE MONASTERY WALLS
FOR NOW



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THIS IS AN

ON THE PATH...

The monk Obo-san refused to surrender the Weapon of Heaven to Emperor Mitsumune, ruler of Nayado. In a fit of madness, or perhaps sanity, Mitsumune committed ritual suicide and was resurrected, commanding Obo-san's death. Obo-san and his companions, Wulf and Aiko, escaped to a northern monastery. Imperial General Fujiwara laid siege. As Wulf and Obo-san prepared strategy, demons melted from the monastery shadows.

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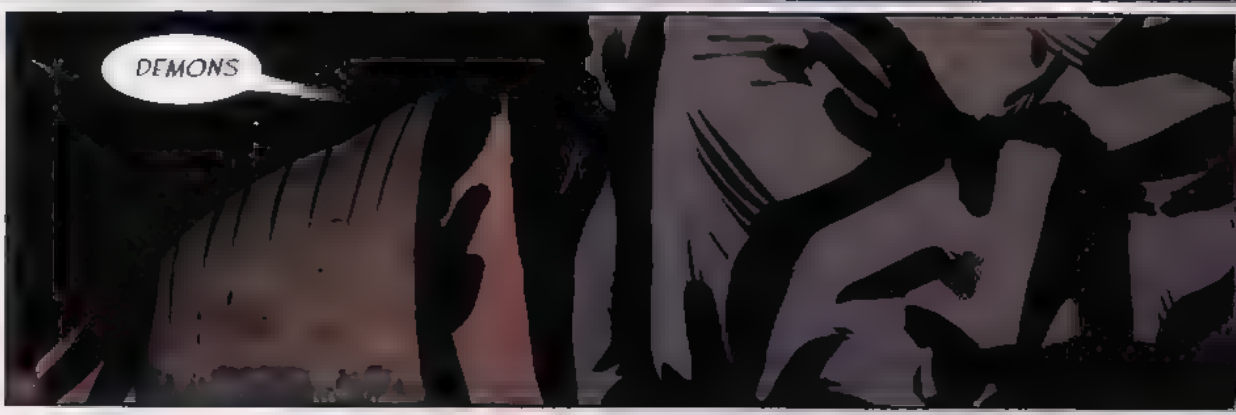
GENERAL GUO
THE WAY IS CLEAR
BUT I FRANKLY DON'T CARE WHETHER WORD IS SPREAD OR NOT. LET THEM KNOW THE SONS OF SHINAGEN HAVE RETURNED
WITH WHAT'S LEFT OF ITS ARMY DRAWN TO THE NORTH NAYAPO WON'T BE ABLE TO PROTECT ITSELF EVEN IF OUR PRESENCE IS KNOWN
THIS TIME WE WON'T BE DRIVEN BACK

WE DON'T EXPECT MUCH RESISTANCE FROM THE VILLAGE. IT'S MOSTLY WOMEN AND OLD MEN
WE'RE ROUNDING THEM UP TO MAKE CERTAIN NO ONE ESCAPES AND SPREADS NEWS OF THE INVASION
GOOD
THIS MISERABLE SCRAP OF AN ISLAND WILL BELONG TO THE AUGUST EMPIRE WITHIN THE WEEK
I WANT THIS WRAPPED UP AS QUICKLY AS POSSIBLE
UNDERSTOOD?
YES SIR
WE MARCH ON YAZAK IMMEDIATELY
AND WHEN WE GET THERE I'LL HAV MITSUMUNE'S HEAD AS MY TROPHY

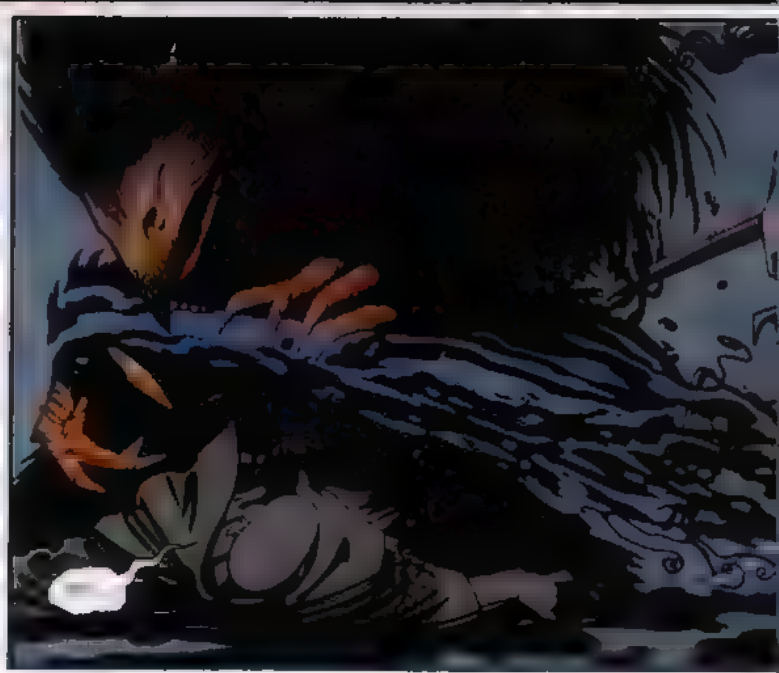
NOOO!

YOU KNOW RYUICHI BETTER THAN I OBO SAN
HOW LONG WILL HE WAIT BEFORE THROWING HIS MEN AT THE MONASTERY WALLS?
HE HAS ALWAYS BEEN PATIENT WULF
BUT HE WILL BE LOATH TO KEEP THE ARMY SO FAR FROM THE CAPITAL FOR ANY LENGTH OF TIME
WE HAVE A DAY PERHAPS *TWO*, BUT NO LONGER BEFORE HE CAN FELL ENOUGH TREES TO MAKE LAUNCHES AND
MEEGH!
ONE OF THE *MONKS!*
APPARENTLY RYUICHI IS NOT SO *PATIENT* AS YOU BELIEVE
HE MUST HAVE SENT A FORCE TO ATTACK IN SECRET

GYAAH!


DEMONS

WE'LL SEE HOW THEY LIKE THE TASTE OF STEEL



THEY MELTED FROM THE SHADOWS
AND BEGAN *SLAUGHTERING* THE MONKS
PERHAPS THEY *ARE* THE SHADOWS
IS IT RYUICHI? DID *HE* SEND THEM?
THIS IS *BEYOND* HIM, AIKO
WHEREVER THEY CAME FROM

YOU WOULD CARVE THE SHADOWS THEMSELVES
WITH SUCH A *TINY* THING?

WELL?
SOURCE SAN?
THEY ARE HERE FOR YOU
THEY DESTROY OUR FELLOW MONKS SEARCHING FOR YOU
BUT THEIR OBJECTIVE IS THE SAME AS HIS
THE WEAPON
IT IS YOUR ONLY HOPE
IT IS YOUR SALVATION
NO
THE WEAPON OF HEAVEN IS TAINTED BY THE GODS I HAVE SWORN TO UNLEASH ITS MIGHT ONLY AGAINST THEM
THAT IS A VOW I WILL NOT BREAK

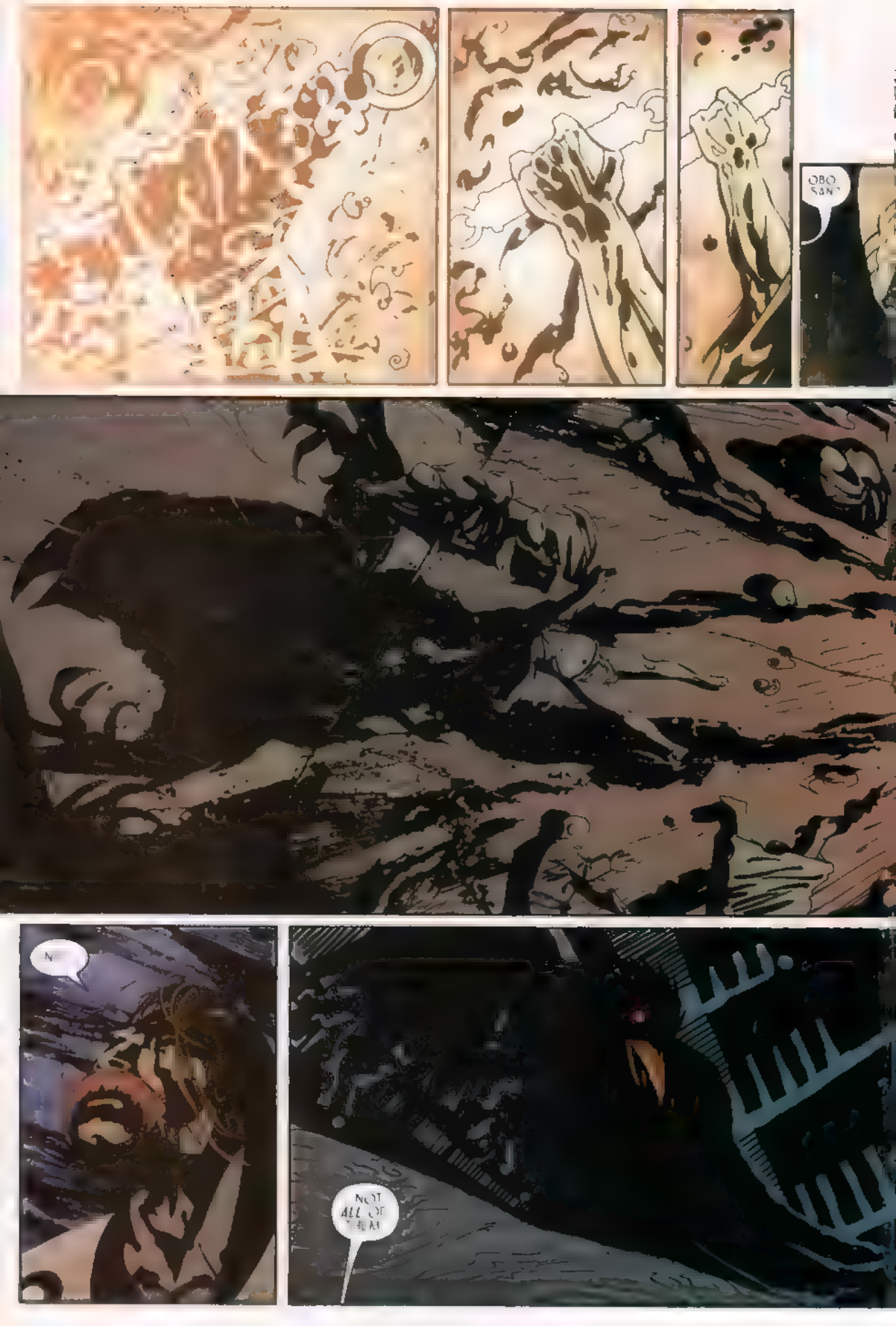
FOR ME?
THESE [illegible] ARE SENT BY MITSUMORI THEN?
IS *THAT* HOW HE HAS BEEN RESURRECTED?
MITSUMORI IS A SEPARATE MATTER
THE DEMONS WERE SENT BY ANOTHER
AND ONCE YOU VOWED *LOYALTY* TO THOSE SAME BEINGS
YOU HAVE BEEN GIVEN A *GIFT*, OBOU SAN
YOU WILL HAVE NO CHOICE BUT TO *USE* IT
NO

NO!
NO!
FOUL CREATURES!
I COMMAND YOU BEGONE FROM THIS PLACE!
HIM
HE IS
THE ONE WHO ARRIES WHAT WE WANT
FOOL
A MORTAL MAN

THERE
WHY
YOU BELIEVE YOUR MIGHT IS ENOUGH TO COMMAND THE LIKE OF US?
IT WAS
ALL ALONG, IT WAS OBO-SAN THEY WANTED
WHNF

YOU GAINED ONLY YOUR OWN DOOM
BY REFUSING TO SURRENDER THE WEAPON OF HEAVEN TO ATSUMUNE
NOW YOU PERISH
AND MY MASTER WILL STILL POSSESS THE WEAPON
THERE WILL BE NOTHING TO STOP HIM FROM PUTTING ALL NAYADO TO THE TORCH
ALREADY MY MASTER'S ARMY SHAKES THE GROUND AS IT MARCHES ON YAZAKI
EVER
YOU WOULD CARRY THAT SECRET TO YOUR GRAVE
IF ANY HERE WOULD BE LEFT ALIVE TO BURY YOU

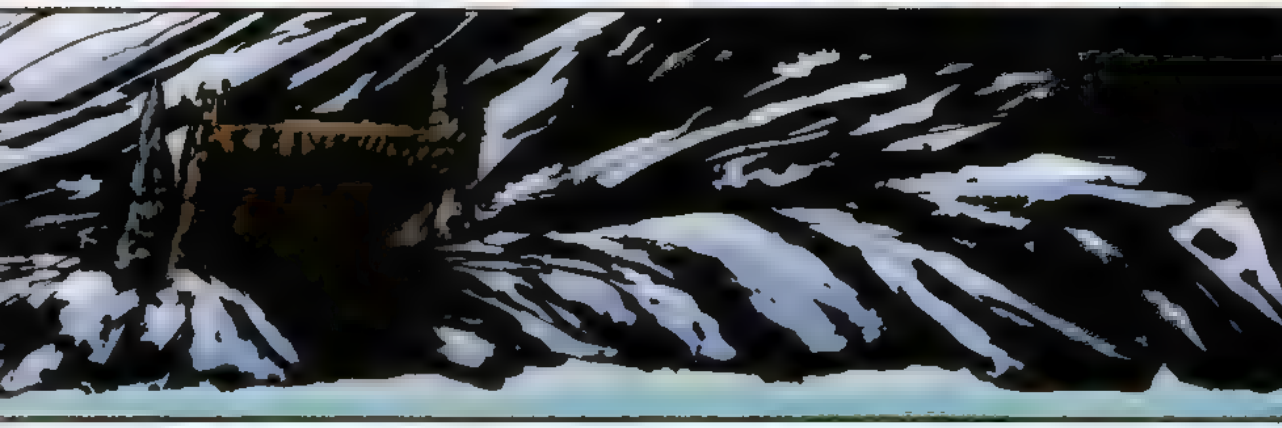
YOUR MASTER YOU DO NOT SERVE MITSUMUNE?
I AM BOUND TO THE AUGUST EMPEROR OF SHINACEA
NOT THE CREATURE I AM FORCED TO LIE WITH
YUKIO
NNF


OBO SAN?
NOT ALL OF

OBO-SAN ARE YOU HURT?
WHAT?
I USED IT. I USED THE WEAPON
WHAT HAPPENED?
IT DESTROYED THEM
THAT ONE REELS FROM ITS WOUNDS
BUT IT LIVES
AND IT THINKS TO ESCAPE!

WHY? WHAT TRANSPIRES?

Hmf
OBO-SAN?
OBO-SAN COME HERE! RYUICHI'S ARMY



SHINACEAS HORDES HAVE AGAIN BREACHED OUR SHORES.
RYUICHI MUST HAVE RECEIVED WORD AND GOES TO MEET THEM, THOUGH HE WILL BE SORELY OUTNUMBERED
OBO-SAN, HOW? HOW COULD YOU POSSIBLY KNOW THIS?
THE DEMON YUKIO REVEALED IT TO ME SHINACEA MARCHES UPON YAZAKI

THEN WE ARE SAFE HERE FOR A TIME?
NONE OF US ARE SAFE

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The monk Obo-san refused to surrender the Weapon of Heaven to Emperor Mitsumune, ruler of Nayado. Mitsumune committed ritual suicide and was resurrected, commanding Obo-san's death. Obo-san and his companions, Wulf and Aiko, escaped to a northern monastery, pursued by General [illegible] and his [illegible]. Once there, Obo-san was forced to use the Weapon of Heaven to destroy a [illegible] of [illegible] the invading army of [illegible].

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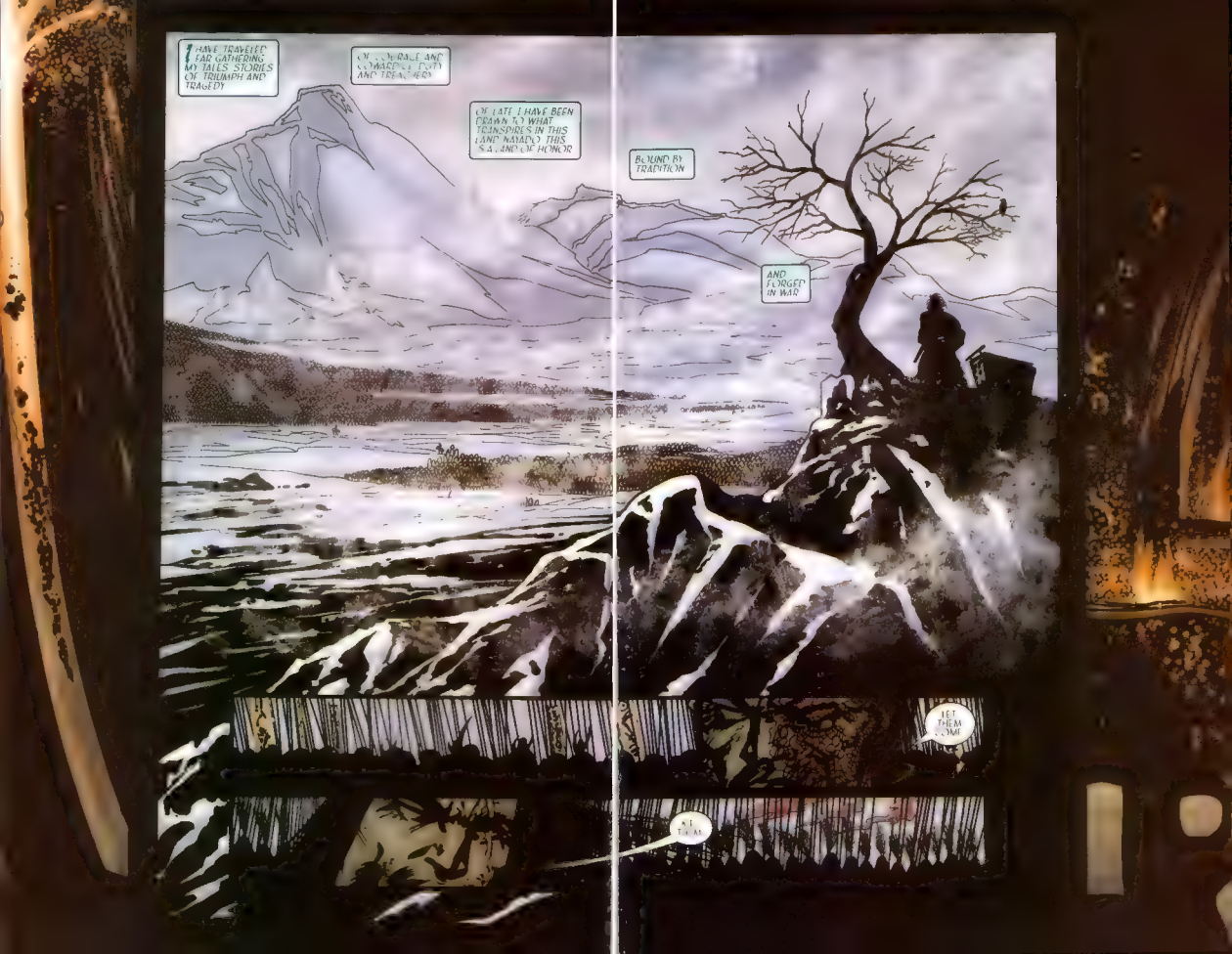
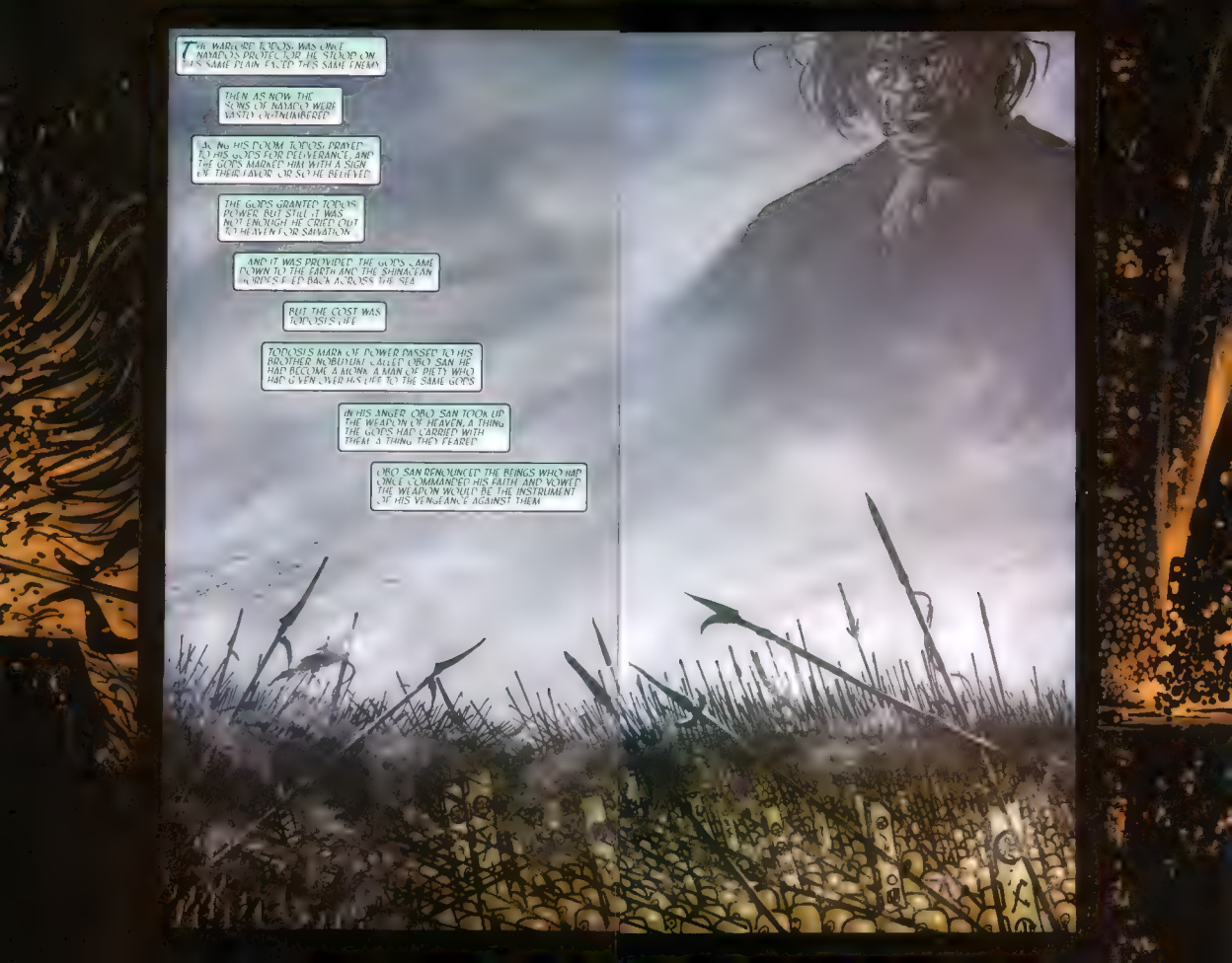
I AM A TELLER OF TALES


I HAVE TRAVELED FAR GATHERING MY TALES STORIES OF TRIUMPH AND TRAGEDY
OF COURAGE AND CHARACTER TRUTH AND TREACHERY
OF LATE I HAVE BEEN DRAWN TO WHAT TRANSPIRES IN THIS LAND NAVADO THIS SEA AND OF HONOR
BOUND BY TRADITION
AND FORGED IN WAR
LET THEM COME
ALL TODAY

I HAVE OFTEN STOOD WITNESS TO MANKIND'S GREAT EVENTS
I HAVE WATCHED THE COURSE OF HISTORY CHANGE BEFORE ME
AND AS IS EVER THE WAY OF MAN
HISTORY IS WRITTEN IN BLOOD

NOW
NAYADO'S SCARRED WARLORD, TAMARA RYUICHI LEADS WHAT REMAINS OF HIS ARMY TO PROTECT NOT ONLY THE CAPITAL OF YAZAKI, BUT HIS NATION'S ENTIRE WAY OF LIFE
SHINACEA'S OVERWHELMING MIGHT SEEKS TO FINALLY CRUSH ARROGANT NAYADO, A LAND NEVER ONCE CONQUERED, AND WIPE IT FROM THE FACE OF THE WORLD
THEY CLASH IN THE VALLEY WHERE THIS TALE BEGAN
XXXX

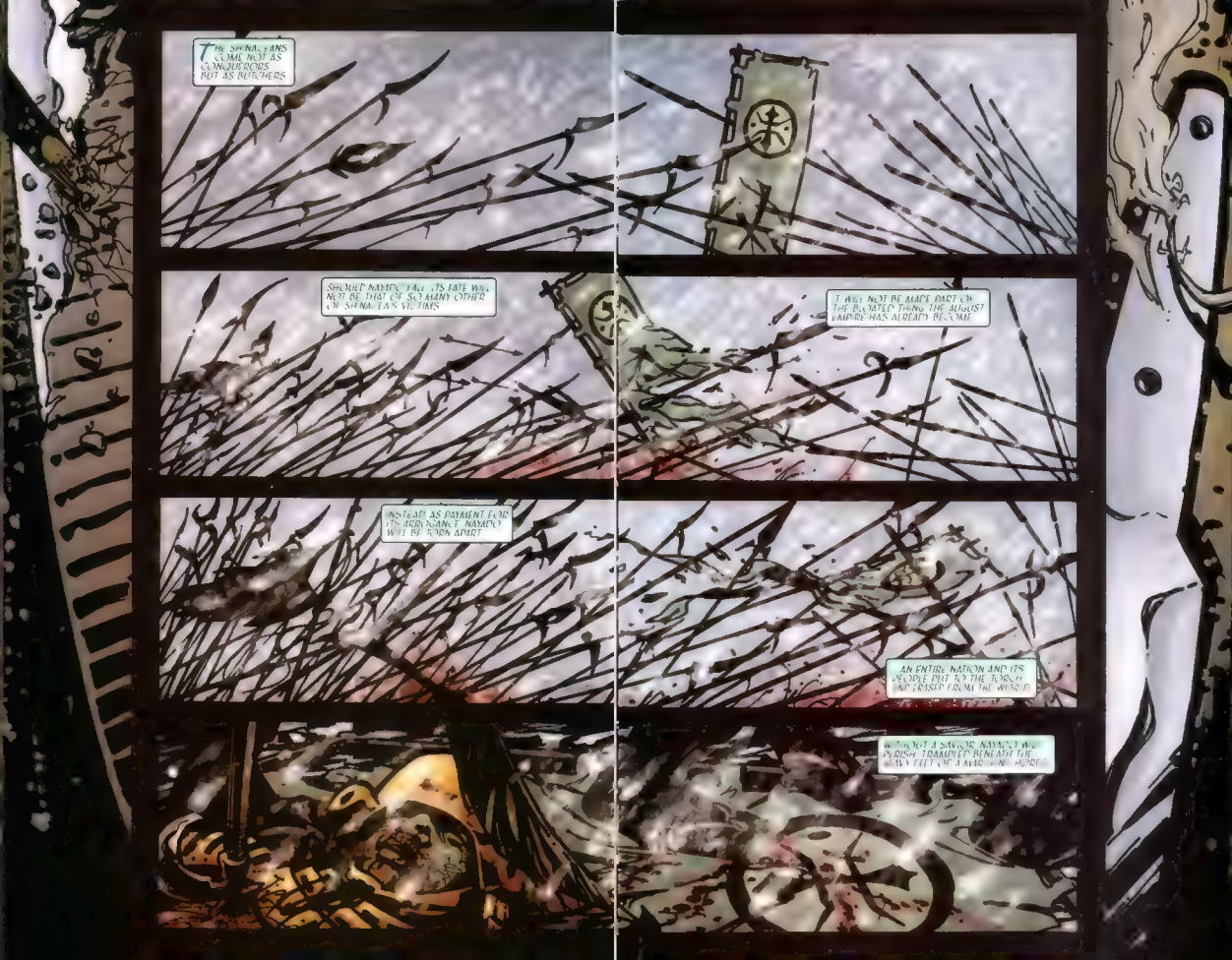

THE WARLORD TODOSI WAS ONCE NAMEDOS PROTÉGÉ, BUT HE STOOD ON THE SAME PLAIN AS THE SHINAZAIN ENEMY
THEN AS NOW THE SONS OF NAMEDO WERE VASTLY OUTNUMBERED
AS NO HIS DOOM TODOSI PRAYED TO HIS GODS FOR DELIVERANCE, AND THE GODS MARKED HIM WITH A SIGN OF THEIR FAVOR OR SO HE BELIEVED
THE GODS GRANTED TODOSI POWER BUT STILL IT WAS NOT ENOUGH HE CRIED OUT TO HEAVEN FOR SALVATION
AND IT WAS PROVIDED THE GODS CAME DOWN TO THE EARTH AND THE SHINAZAIN HORDES FLED BACK ACROSS THE SEA
BUT THE COST WAS TODOSI'S LIFE
TODOSI'S MARK OF POWER PASSED TO HIS BROTHER NOBUNDAI CALLED OBO SAN HE HAD BECOME A MONK A MAN OF PIETY WHO HAD GIVEN OVER HIS LIFE TO THE SAME GODS
IN HIS ANGER OBO SAN TOOK UP THE WEAPON OF HEAVEN A THING THE GODS HAD CARRIED WITH THEM A THING THEY FEARED
OBO SAN RENOUNCED THE BEINGS WHO HAD ONCE COMMANDED HIS FAITH AND VOWED THE WEAPON WOULD BE THE INSTRUMENT OF HIS VENGEANCE AGAINST THEM

BUT THE TALE BECOMES MORE INTERESTING STILL
OBO-SAN REFUSED TO SURRENDER THE WEAPON TO HIS IMPERIAL MISTRESS
MITSUMUNE, WHO HAS RISEN FROM THE DEAD AND BECOME SOMETHING OTHER THAN WHAT HE SEEMS TO BE
MITSUMUNE, WHO SENT RYUICHI TO EXECUTE OBO-SAN AND RETRIEVE THE WEAPON
YEARS LATER. NOW OBO-SAN BROODS BEHIND MONASTERY WALLS WHILE RYUICHI PREPARES TO DIE FOR HIS EMPEROR
THEY WERE BOYS TOGETHER, TODOSHI OBO-SAN RYUICHI MITSUMUNE
YES, THE TALE BECOMES MORE INTERESTING.
FORWARD!

BUT WHAT TRULY HAS BEEN GAINED? SHINAI-EA HAS RETURNED AND NAYADO IS EVEN LESS ABLE TO DEFEND ITSELF
THERE ARE NOT ENOUGH SWORDS IN ALL NAYADO TO TURN BACK SUCH A HOST THIS TIME THERE WILL BE NO RELIEVED BY THE GODS
THE WEAPON OF HEAVEN IS HELD BY OBO SAN AND THOUGH HE UNLEASHED ITS MIGHT TO DESTROY A PLAGUE OF DEMONS
HE HAS VOWED TO USE ITS POWER ONLY FOR RETRIBUTION AGAINST THE GODS
THERE IS NO HOPE EVERY KNOWS THIS

HE KNOWS EVEN AS THE ARMIES HEAVE AND BUCK AGAINST ONE ANOTHER LIKE GREAT BEASTS THAT HE IS ALREADY A CORPSE
FIGHT!
FIGHT, WARRIORS OF NAMEDY! WE ALL DIE THIS DAY!
GHRG!
BUT WE DIE WITH HONOR AND CONSECRATE THIS SOIL WITH OUR BLOOD!
TODAY WE DIE
AND SO DOES EVERY BARBARIAN WHORESON OF SHINACEA!

I HAVE SEEN THAT THESE WERE I BELIEVE THEMSELVES TO BE GREAT FIGHT MORE FEROCIOUSLY
THE MEN OF NAMAKO ARE WARRIORS TRAINED IN THE SAMURAI TRADITION. THEY WALK THE NAGOJIMA PATH
WAY ONE IN THAT


THE SHINAZANS COME NOT AS CONQUERORS BUT AS BUTCHERS
SHOULD NAMPO FALL, ITS FATE WILL NOT BE THAT OF SO MANY OTHER SHINAZAN VICTIMS
IT WILL NOT BE MADE PART OF THE BLOATED THING THE AUGUST EMPIRE HAS ALREADY BECOME
INSTEAD, AS PAYMENT FOR ITS ARROGANCE, NAMPO WILL BE TORN APART
AN ENTIRE NATION AND ITS PEOPLE PUT TO THE TORCH AND ERASED FROM THE WORLD
I WILL GET A SAY FOR NAMPO, I WILL
TRAMPLED BENEATH THE MY FEET OF A MILLION MORE

COME AND FACE ME
WE WILL SELL OUR LIVES DEARLY WE WILL DIE WITH HONOR
THAT IS WHY YOU LOST THIS BATTLE
THAT IS WHY WARRIORS WIN
WHOOSH
PRAISE YOU VALUE HONOR YOU VALUE THE LIVES OF YOUR MEN
I DO NOT
I WOULD SEND A HUNDRED OF MY MEN TO THEIR DEATHS TO SLAY ONLY ONE OF YOUR WARRIORS
AND ANOTHER
AND ANOTHER
WE OF SHINAZEA ARE ENDLESS WE ARE AS THE TIDE
A WAVE BREAKS UPON A SHORE AND IS GONE BUT BEHIND IT THERE IS ANOTHER
THAT IS OUR STRENGTH

AND YOUR DEATH
HRG!
GLK!
HKK!

WHO BRINGS US SALVATION?
I AM A TELLER OF TALES
THIS IS A TALE OF PETTY GODS AND SHADOWY DEMONS. BUT MORE THAN THAT IT IS A TALE OF MEN
THEY WOULD WIPE OUT EVERYTHING NAYADO IS BROTHERS
THEY MUST BE DESTROYED
AND IT IS NOT YET OVER

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WE'RE SAVED
YOU'RE NOT
HAGH!
FORWARD, BROTHERS!
WE FIGHT NOT FOR OUR LIVES

THIS IS A TALE OF MEN AND THEIR DEEDS

BUT FOR THE LIFE OF NAYADO ITSELF!

A TALE OF THE MONK OBO SAN

HE HAS FORESWORN THE GODS TO WHOM HE ONCE PRAYED, AND AGAIN TAKEN UP THE WAY OF THE WARRIOR

GENERAL GOJO, WHO IS IT THAT *ATTACKS* US?

MONKS

NAYADO'S LAST HOPE

HALF A HUNDRED MONASTERY BOUND MEN

LOOK TO OUR *FLANK*, MEN OF SHINACEA!

SLAY THESE NEW ENEMIES AND THE DAY IS *OURS!*

WILL HE BE NAYADO'S SAVIOR?

GENERAL RYUICHI

WHO IS IT THAT *SAVES* US?

MONKS

OBO SAN AND THE MONKS OF THE TARA MISH MONASTERY

THE SAME MEN WE SO RECENTLY MEANT TO *KILL*

NAYADO IS GRANTED A *REPRIEVE*, MY WARRIORS

LET US EXACT THE *PAYMENT* FOR THE HONORED BLOOD THAT'S BEEN SPILLED!

OR WILL HE SIMPLY BE THE LAST OF HIS NATION'S SONS TO FALL TO THE SHINACEAN INVADERS?

A TALE OF THE OUTLANDER WULF

HE SWORE HIS LOYALTY TO THE SLAIN WARLORD TODOSI, A VOW THAT NOW EXTENDS TO TODOSI'S BROTHER OBO SAN

WILL EVEN WULF'S LEGENDARY STRENGTH AND FEROCITY BE ENOUGH TO SAVE HIS ADOPTED HOMELAND?

A TALE OF THE SAMURAI AIKO

SHE LEARNED THE ARTS OF WAR FROM TODOSI. SHE CAME TO LOVE THE WARLORD, AND GRIEVED SILENTLY AT HIS DEATH, BUT NOW FINDS HER THOUGHTS TURNING TO OBO SAN

WILL TODOSI'S GREAT BLADE IN AIKO'S HANDS BE AN INSTRUMENT OF BLOODY DELIVERANCE?

A TALE, EVEN, OF SIMPLE MIGHTY YAMA

ONCE HE WAS A CHAMPION OF SUMO, BUT HIS MIND HAS BEEN REDUCED TO THAT OF A CHILD

WILL HE BE ABLE TO HOLD BACK THE SAVAGE TIDE OF SHINACEA?

No

NONE OF THEM WILL BE ENOUGH

THEY ARE STILL *TOO MANY*, OBO-SAN!

WE ARE *SURROUNDED*

AND THEY WILL *DROWN US* WITH THEIR NUMBERS!

AS BEFORE, SALVATION WILL COME ONLY FROM THE GODS OR AT LEAST THEIR WEAPON

CUT THEM DOWN

NO PRISONERS

OBO-SAN! WE ARE NOT ENOUGH!

USE IT, OBO SAN! THERE IS NO *CHOICE!*

YOU MUST *USE* IT

OR *NAYADO* PERISHES AS *WE DO!*

MONK I

NAYADO LIVES.

GUH!

ON YOUR FEET

YOU'RE THE GENERAL WHO LED THIS SHINAGEAN FILTH?

I WAS

BUT MY SOLDIERS ARE DEAD I WOULD *JOIN* THEM

I ASK THAT YOU GRANT ME *THAT* MUCH PLEASE

SLAY ME

YOU WILL DELIVER A *MESSAGE*

OBO-SAN, *WHY?*

WHY COME TO OUR RESCUE WHEN WE HAD SOUGHT YOUR DEATH?

THAT MITSUMUNE HAS PLACED A DEATH SENTENCE UPON MY HEAD DOES NOT CHANGE MY LOYALTY TO OUR LAND, RYUICHI

I COULD NOT STAND BY AND SEE NAYADO RAVAGED BY THESE INVADERS

THE WEAPON OF HEAVEN IS TRULY THE *MIGHTIEST* WEAPON EVER POSSESSED BY *ANY* MAN

YOU COULD STILL SURRENDER IT TO ME. AFTER WHAT HAS HAPPENED HERE MITSUMUNE SURELY WOULD RESCIND YOUR SENTENCE

JUST AS I COULD NOT ALLOW NAYADO TO BE DESTROYED FROM WITHOUT

I WILL NOT LET IT BE DESTROYED FROM *WITHIN*

MITSUMUNE IS *MAD*

HE IS LIKELY TO BRING DESTRUCTION TO HIS *OWN* PEOPLE IF HE HELD SUCH MIGHT

I MUST *KEEP* THE WEAPON

DOES THAT MEAN MY BROTHER MONKS AND I MUST DO BATTLE AGAINST YOUR SOLDIERS?

NO

ENOUGH OF NAYADO'S BLOOD HAS BEEN SPILLED THIS DAY. I WILL SPILL NO MORE

WHAT WILL YOU *DO* NOW RYUICHI?

YOU KNOW AS WELL AS I DO OBO-SAN. I WILL RETURN TO YAZAKI AND BE *EXECUTED* FOR MY FAILURE. AS HONOR AND DUTY DEMAND

THAT IS THE PATH I CHOSE LONG AGO. I CANNOT TURN FROM IT

AND *YOU?* WHAT IS *IT* YOU WILL DO NOW?

I HAVE CHOSEN A PATH AS WELL

BUT I DO NOT KNOW WHERE IT LEADS

GOODBYE, OBO-SAN
I AM GLAD TO HAVE KNOWN YOU

ANOTHER CHAPTER OF THIS TALE IS WRITTEN, CRIMSON STROKES ON FRESHLY FALLEN SNOW
I WILL REMAIN IN THIS PLACE
I WILL LEARN HOW THIS TALE ENDS

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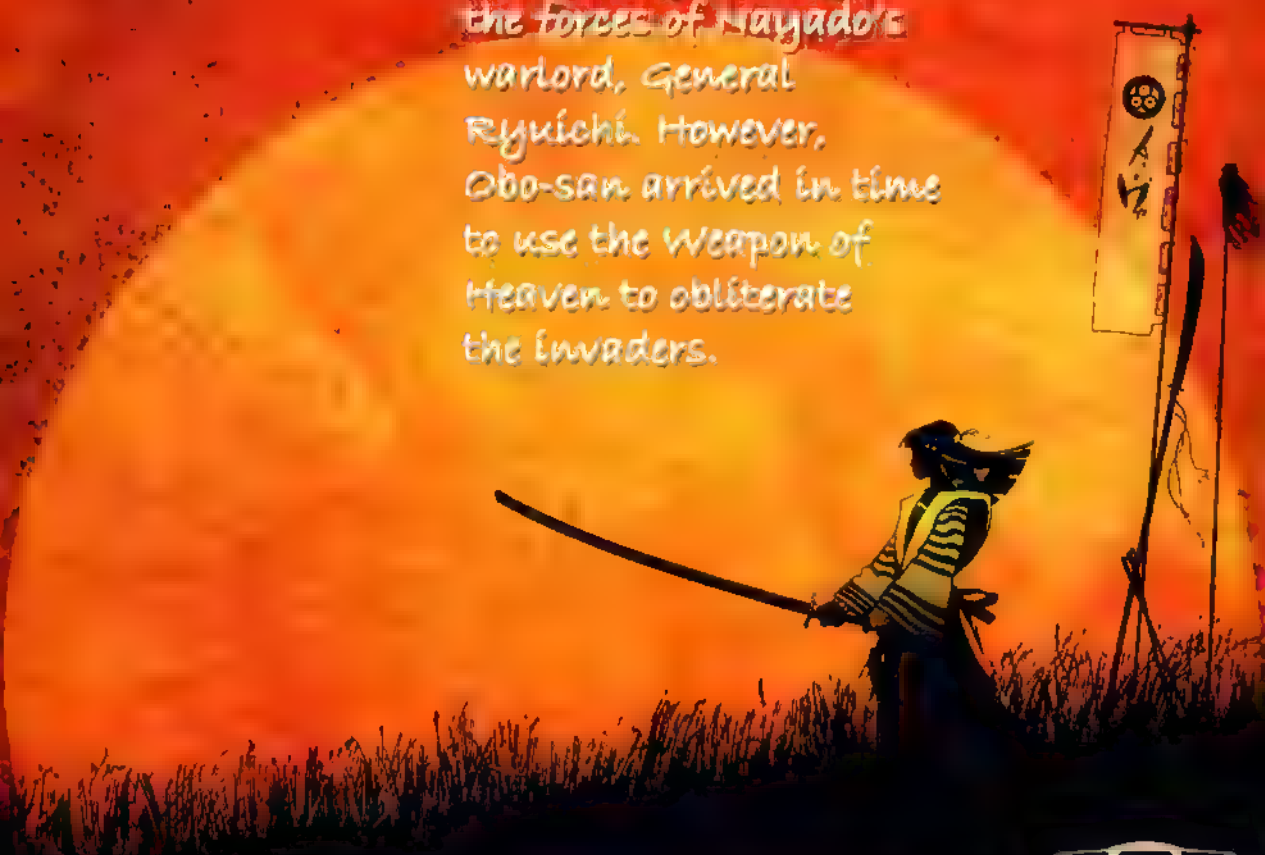
ON THE PATH...

The monk Obo-san refused to surrender the Weapon of Heaven to Emperor Mitsumune, ruler of Nayado. Mitsumune committed ritual suicide and was resurrected, commanding Obo-san's death. Obo-san and his companions, Wulf and Aiko, fled. Meanwhile, the invading army of Shinacea met and nearly destroyed the forces of Nayado's warlord, General Ryuichi. However, Obo-san arrived in time to use the Weapon of Heaven to obliterate the invaders.



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EMPEROR ZHUNG?
I BEG A THOUSAND AND ONE PARDONS FOR DISTURBING YOU MY EMPEROR BUT THERE IS ONE WHO WISHES AN *AUDIENCE* WITH YOU
SEND THEM AWAY EUNUCH I AM OCCUPIED WITH MY AMUSEMENTS
THE DRAGONS ARE RELEASED AND BEGIN THEIR DANCE CAN YOU NOT SEE?
OF COURSE MY EMPEROR OF COURSE
BUT I MOST HUMBLY SUGGEST THAT HE WHO PRESENTS HIMSELF IS ONE YOU WOULD WISH TO SEE
IT'S A *SOLDIER*, MY EMPEROR RETURNED FROM THE INVASION OF NAVARO

THE ONLY SOLDIER RETURNED FROM THE INVASION OF NAVAPO

THE *ONLY* SURVIVOR?

MY ARMY WAS *DEFEATED?*

GREAT EMPEROR *FORGIVE* ME THE TALE I MUST TELL

WE LANDED UPON NAYADO'S SHORES WITH LITTLE RESISTANCE

GENERAL GUO LED US TOWARD YAZAKI

UNTIL WE FACED RYUICHI AND WHAT REMAINED OF NAYADO'S WARRIORS ON THE PLAIN

WE OUTNUMBERED THEM TEN MEN TO ONE MY EMPEROR

THEY COULD NOT STAND BEFORE US, AND WE *OVERWHELMED* THEM

BUT AS WE SURROUNDED THOSE WHO SURVIVED, AND PREPARED TO CUT THEM DOWN

THERE APPEARED A BAND OF *MONKS*

HE WHO LED THEM WIELDED A MIRACULOUS WEAPON

A WEAPON OF SUCH VAST MIGHT THAT IT *DESTROYED* THE ENTIRETY OF OUR ARMY

ALL WERE SLAIN SAVE ME

I WAS SPARED

SO I COULD RETURN WITH A *MESSAGE*

I SENT AN ARMY *TEN THOUSAND STRONG* TO CRUSH NAYADO'S ARROGANCE

TO FINALLY END *CENTURIES* OF DEFIANCE

AND AM I HAVE TO SHOW FOR IT

IS THE *SEVERED HEAD* OF MY GENERAL!

PLEASE MY EMPEROR

IS THERE *NO ONE* WHO CAN CARRY OUT MY WILL?

MY ARMY FAILS TO DELIVER ME VICTORY

AAAAAH!

JUST AS *YOU* FAILED TO OBTAIN THE WEAPON OF HEAVEN YUKIO

OBO-SAN SLEW A *GREAT MANY* OF MY KIND WITH IT MASTER

AND HE *PROTECTS* NAYADO WITH IT

I HAVE BEEN DISTRACTED BY THAT DAMNABLE LAND TOO LONG

BARBARIANS HARRY MY CITIES TO THE NORTH FOREIGNERS ENCROACH UPON MY LANDS TO THE WEST

I WILL TURN MY ATTENTION TO THESE THINGS

AND LET NAYADO TROUBLE ME NO MORE

YOU THERE

MOVE ALONG

WE'VE *ENOUGH* SCAVENGERS UPON THE BATTLE FIELD

THOUGH AT LEAST THE DAMNED *CARRION EATERS* HAVE HAD THEIR FILL

WU...

DO WE PREPARE TO RETURN TO THE MONASTERY, AKO?

I KNOW NOT

WHY DOES OBO SAN DELAY? I WOULD BE *GONE* FROM THIS PLACE OF THE DEAD

WHERE *IS* HE?

THERE

I WOULD ASK A *QUESTION* OF YOU STRANGER

ASK WHAT YOU WILL

I WOULD KNOW WHY A MAN STANDS BY AND SIMPLY WATCHES THE BLOODSHED THAT HAS TAKEN PLACE ON THE PLAIN BELOW

AND WHY HE BRINGS A *CHILD* TO SUCH A THING

CHILD?

THERE IS NO CHILD HERE

I AM A TRAVELER I FIND TEASER TO CARRY MY MEAGER BELONGINGS IN SUCH A MANNER

AS TO THE BATTLE

I AM A TELLER OF TALES THE TALE UNFOLDING BEFORE ME DRAWS MY INTEREST OBOSAN

I HAVE NOT *GIVEN* YOU MY NAME

YET I DO KNOW IT NONETHELESS

JUST AS I KNOW YOU WERE ONCE TSUGAWA NOBUYUKI AND THAT YOU BEAR A MARK OF POWER GIVEN YOUR BROTHER TOPOSI

AS I KNOW THAT MARK GIVES YOU THE ABILITY TO BEND THE WILL OF MEN WITH YOUR VOICE

I AM AWARE THAT YOU BEAR THE WEAPON OF HEAVEN

AND THAT YOU STRUGGLE WITH THE BURDEN

HOW CAN YOU *KNOW* ALL THIS?

WHY DO YOU *WATCH* ME?

YOU HAVE NOT EVEN GIVEN ME *YOUR* NAME

MY NAME IS UNIMPORTANT AS I HAVE TOLD YOU, I AM SIMPLY A TELLER OF TALES

I HAVE JOURNEYED *FAR*, FARTHER THAN YOU COULD IMAGINE IN ORDER TO COLLECT MY TALES

AND I HAVE REMAINED HERE LONGER THAN I INTENDED BECAUSE YOU AND THIS LAND BEGIN TO HAVE THE MAKINGS OF *LEGEND*

THIS IS A LAND OF HONOR AND YET NAYADO IS CONFLICTED

AS ARE *YOU* BOTH ARE TORN BETWEEN TRADITION AND CHANGE

BETWEEN BEAUTY AND HORROR

BETWEEN TRANQUILITY AND VIOLENCE

YOUR FATES ARE JOINED

NAYADO'S FUTURE RESTS IN YOUR HANDS

SO YOU BELIEVE

OF COURSE

YOU HAVE VANQUISHED NAYADO'S FOES

BUT DO YOU POSSESS THE COURAGE TO SAVE NAYADO FROM HERSELF?

YOU SPEAK OF HE WHO SITS UPON THE THRONE OF PETALS

YOU SPEAK OF *MITSUMUNE*

I WILL TELL *YOU* A STORY

WHEN WE WERE YOUNG MEN MITSUMUNE AND I TRAVELED TO HIROAKI PROVINCE IN THE SOUTH WE TRAVELED AS *COMMONERS*, NOT SONS OF NOBLE BIRTH

WE CAME TO AN INN BY THE SEA, A *SIMPLE* PLACE WHERE WE COULD EAT AND STAY THE NIGHT

WHILE WE WERE THERE SOME *FISH* WAS STOLEN FROM THE LARDER WE HAD SEEN AN OLD WOMAN TAKE THE FOOD SIMPLY TO FEED HERSELF

THE INNKEEPER SUSPECTED HER, AND DEMANDED THE THIEF COME FORWARD HE SWORE THE CULPRIT WOULD BE WHIPPED FOR THE CRIME

THE PUNISHMENT WOULD HAVE KILLED THE WOMAN BEFORE SHE COULD BE TAKEN MITSUMUNE SAID *HE* HAD STOLEN THE FISH

THE INNKEEPER *DOUBTED* HIS GUILT BUT MITSUMUNE WAS INSISTENT HE APOLOGIZED AND SUBMITTED TO THE PUNISHMENT

SO THE INNKEEPER, A MAN OF LOWLY BIRTH UNWITTINGLY *WHIPPED* THE CROWN PRINCE AND THE CRONE WAS *SPARED*

THAT IS THE KIND OF *MAN* MITSUMUNE IS

OR *WAS*

I SAW MITSUMUNE PERISH I SAW HIS HEAD SEVERED FROM HIS NECK AND THE BLIND CORPSE CRAWLING ON THE GROUND UNTIL IT *FOUND* THE HEAD

HOW CAN A MAN *DIE* AND LIVE AGAIN?

MITSUMUNE IS FAR MORE THAN YOU THINK HIM TO BE HE *IS* YOUR FRIEND

AND YET HE IS *NOT*

I THINK YOU KNOW FAR MORE THAN YOU SAY

AS DO ALL STORYTELLERS

YOUR FELLOW MONKS KNEEL IN PRAYER OBO-SAN

YET YOU DO NOT JOIN THEM *WHY?*

YOU ARE THE STORYTELLER

YOU MUST KNOW

I HAVE EXCHANGED MY FAITH FOR THE STEEL OF A *KOTANUKI*

I HAVE TURNED MY BACK UPON MY PAST AND IT SEEMS UNLIKELY I HAVE A FUTURE

I HAVE MORE IN COMMON WITH THE *CORPSES* SCATTERED BELOW THAN I DO WITH THE MONKS WHO WERE ONCE MY BROTHERS

YOU NEVER ANSWERED MY QUESTION

DO YOU HAVE THE COURAGE TO SAVE NAYAPO FROM HERSELF?

WHAT IS IT YOU *WANT?*

I WANT TO KNOW HOW YOUR STORY ENDS

AS DO I

COME WITH US AND FIND OUT

WELL?

WHO IS HE?

HE W..L NOT SAY

BUT HE'LL BE ACCOMPANYING US BACK TO THE MONASTERY

THE WEATHER TURNS AGAIN

WE MARCH AS SOON AS WE'RE PREPARED

AND WHEN WE *REACH* THE MONASTERY?

WHAT THEN?

OBO SAN WHAT *THEN?*

OBO SAN?

GENERAL RYUICHI YOU ARE RETURNED

YOU AND YOUR VICTORIOUS ARMY

YOUR MESSENGERS DELIVERED THE NEWS OF YOUR DEFEAT OF SHINACEAS WHORESONS

NAYADO IS TRIUMPHANT!

THIS?

THIS LOOKS TO YOU TO BE A VICTORIOUS ARMY?

WE WERE NOT *VICTORIOUS*.

WE WERE ABOUT TO BE *WIPED OUT* UNTIL WE WERE SAVED BY THE MAN I WAS SENT TO DESTROY.

AND NOW I GO TO PAY THE *PRICE* FOR IT

EMPEROR MITSUMUNE

I HAVE RETURNED

Ah

MY BRAVE AND GALLANT GENERAL

I AM TOLD YOU LED MY ARMY TO VICTORY

THE SHINACEAN INVADERS WERE NOT ONLY DEFEATED THEY ARE *NO MORE*

THAT IS SO

THEY WERE DESTROYED BY THE WEAPON OF HEAVEN

THEN YOU *HAVE* SOMETHING FOR ME?

I DO NOT

THE WEAPON REMAINS WITH OBO SAN

I SENT YOU TO *RETRIEVE* IT

YOU FAILED AT OBO SAN'S MONASTERY

YOU FAILED *AGAIN* AT THE BATTLE FIELD?

YOU DARE DISAPPOINT ME NOT ONCE BUT *TWICE?*

YOU RODE FROM YAZAKI WITH NAYAPO'S FINEST WARRIORS IN YOUR WAKE!

AND *STILL* YOU COULD NOT BRING ME THE *WEAPON* AND OBO SAN'S HEAD!

SHALL I HAVE YOURS INSTEAD, RYUICHI?

I AM PREPARED TO ACCEPT THE PUNISHMENT FOR MY FAILURE

OF COURSE YOU ARE

I'M ALMOST BEGINNING TO *ENJOY* THIS

OBO SAN INTRIGUES ME

KEEP YOUR HEAD, RYUICHI

BUT I *WILL* DESTROY OBO SAN AND I *WILL* HAVE THE WEAPON IF NOT BY *FORCE*

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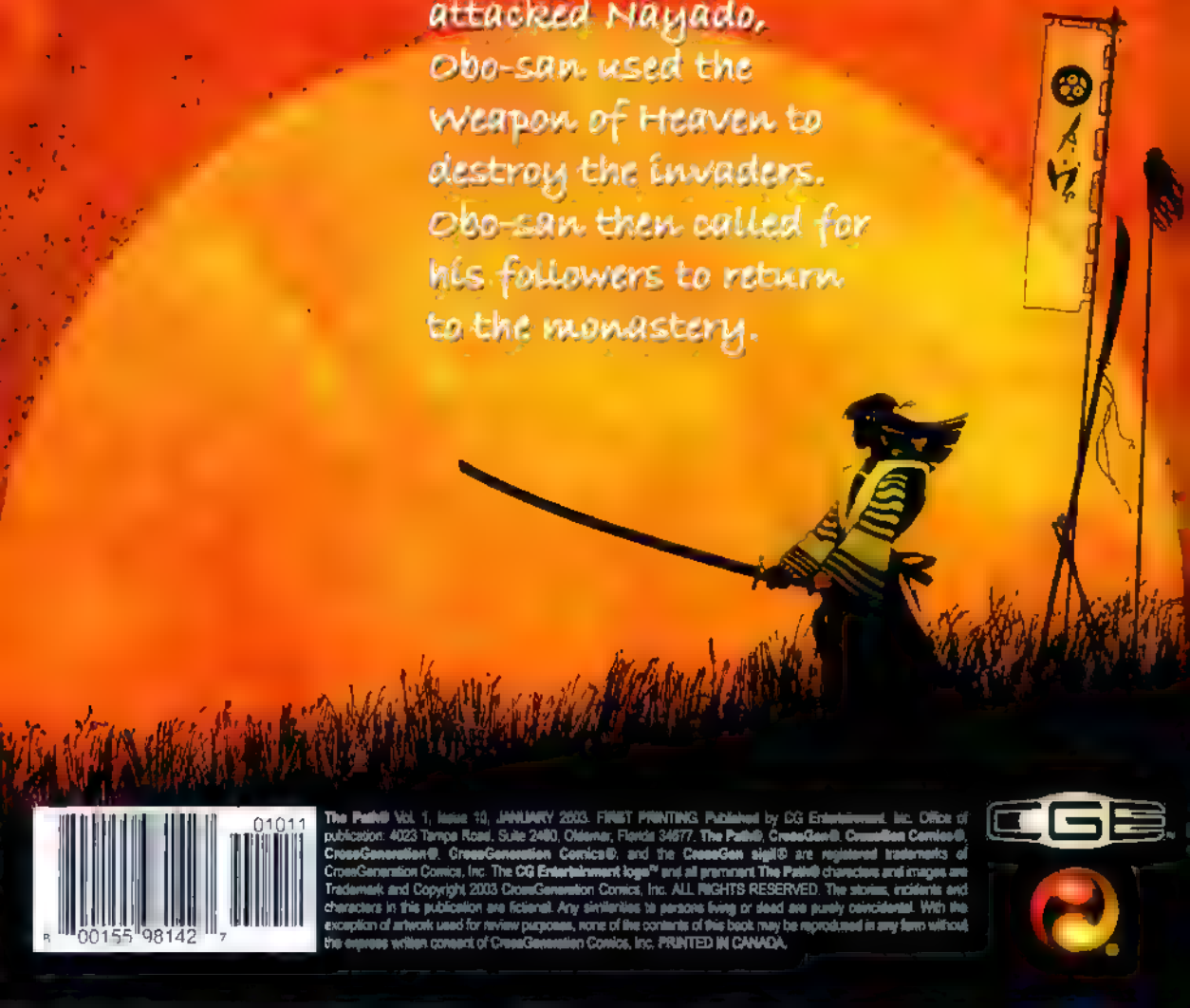
Emperor Mitsumune, ruler of Nayado, placed a death sentence upon the head of the monk Obo-san for his refusal to surrender the Weapon of Heaven. Obo-san and his companions Wulf and Aiko fled to the temporary safety of a northern monastery. When the army of neighboring Shinacea attacked Nayado, Obo-san used the Weapon of Heaven to destroy the invaders. Obo-san then called for his followers to return to the monastery.



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CGE

WE'VE ONLY A FEW MOMENTS BEFORE THE SENTRY RETURNS

THIS IS A MAD EXERCISE WULF

STEALING INTO YAZAKI CASTLE WHEN A *DEATH SENTENCE* HANGS OVER OUR HEADS

I AGREE WHOLE HEARTEDLY

BUT YOU *DID* VOLUNTEER TO ACCOMPANY ME RATHER THAN REMAIN AT THE MONASTERY AIKO

IT SEEMS PEOPLE WILL UNDERTAKE EVEN THE MOST *FOOLISH* OF TASKS FOR LOVE

INDEED THEY DO

AND *YOU*, AIKO? YOU WOULD NEVER DO SOMETHING FOOLISH FOR LOVE?

ASSUMING THERE WAS SOMEONE YOU *LOVED*, OF COURSE

YOU ARE A FOREIGNER

IT IS IMPOLITE TO *ASK* SUCH QUESTIONS

AND EVEN MORE IMPOLITE TO *ANSWER* THEM

THIS ONE

I HAVE NOT ROMANCED ONE OF THE EMPEROR'S COURTESANS

WITHOUT KNOWING THE SECRET PASSAGES OF THE PALACE

THIS IS MADNESS

SO YOU HAVE ALREADY SAID

BUT I WILL NOT LEAVE AYA IN MITSUMUNE'S HANDS ANY LONGER

WERE HE EVER TO DISCOVER THE TRUTH OF OUR AFFAIR

HE WOULD SURELY *EXECUTE* HER MOST CRUELLY IN ORDER TO STRIKE AT ME

AND HERS WOULD NOT BE AN *EASY* DEATH

WELL TAKE HER AWAY TO THE MONASTERY WHERE SHE WILL BE SAFE

OR AT LEAST SAFER *THERE* THAN ANYWHERE ELSE

YOUR *HEART* OVERRULES YOUR *HEAD*

IT *SHOULD*

HER CHAMBERS ARE HERE

WULF

IT'S EMPTY

MITSUMUNE

THERE'S ONLY *ONE* REASON SHE WOULD BE GONE IN THE SMALL HOURS OF THE NIGHT

SHE WAS SUMMONED TO HIS *BEDCHAMBER* FOR HIS PLEASURE

BUT I KNOW THE ROUTE *THERE* AS WELL

WULF

WULF

STEALING INTO THE PALACE AND INTO A COURTESAN'S CHAMBERS *IS* MADNESS

STEALING INTO THE VERY BEDCHAMBER OF THE EMPEROR IS *SUICIDE*

TAKE YOUR *HAND* FROM ME

ACCOMPANY ME OR *FLEE*, AIKO I CARE NOT WHICH

BUT I DID NOT GO TO THIS EFFORT TO *LEAVE* AYA HERE

RAMMPHH

MINE

AHHHH

Shh

IT'S *ME*

WHAT

YOU *CAME* FOR ME

OF COURSE AYA

HAD I ANY CHOICE I WOULD NOT HAVE LEFT *WITHOUT* YOU

I FIRST WENT TO YOUR CHAMBERS, BUT

THE EMPEROR CALLED FOR ME

I HAVE BEEN HERE ALL EVENING

BUT *HE* IS GONE

MITSUMUNE IS A MUCH DIFFERENT MAN THAN HE ONCE WAS

HE WANDERS THE PALACE HALLS AT NIGHT HE LIKELY DOES SO *NOW*

FORTUNATE FOR *HIM*

WE MUST *LEAVE*, AYA WE HAVE HORSES OUTSIDE THE PALACE AND A REFUGE AWAITING US IN THE NORTH

I WOULD FOLLOW YOU ANYWHERE, MY LOVE

EVEN INTO DEATH

LADY AYA

LADY AIKO

LET US HOPE OUR WAY DOES NOT LEAD *THERE*

COME WE MUST DEPART BEFORE MITSUMUNE RETURNS

VISITORS TO THE PALACE AT THIS HOUR ARE MOST UNUSUAL

PARTICULARLY CONSIDERING THE *VISITORS*

YUKIO

WHAT GUISE IS IT THAT YOU WEAR THIS TIME?

COURTESAN TO MITSUMONE?

SPY FOR THE EMPEROR OF SHINACEA?

DEMON?

PERHAPS ALL OF THEM

OBO SAN SLEW A GREAT MANY OF MY SISTERS WITH HIS TRINKET

PITY *YOU* WERE NOT AMONG THEM

EVEN I WAS NOT WITHOUT INJURY

BUT MY KIND *HEALS* QUICKLY

INDEED

WE WILL

WELL SEE

HAAAA!

HH

HRGHH

WELL, ..TTLE MAN?

HOW QUICKLY WILL *YOU* HEA ?

I THINK PERHAPS I SHALL SEND OBO SAN YOUR *HEAD* AS A TOKEN OF MY

EEEAAH!

FACE *ME*, FOUL THING

THE WOMAN WHO WOULD BE A *WARRIOR*

YOU ARE *PRECIOUS* TO OBO SAN I WONDER

WOULD HE TRADE THE WEAPON OF HEAVEN FOR *YOUR* LIFE?

HHYAAGH!

GAAH...

YUKIO

LOOK AFTER YOUR *OWN* HEAD

MY LOVE

HOW BADLY ARE YOU INJURED? SO MUCH *BLOOD*

I'LL *LIVE* AS LONG AS I CAN KEEP MY *GUTS* FROM SPILLING ONTO THE FLOOR

AND ASSUMING WE *LEAVE* THIS PLACE BEFORE THE GUARDS SLAY US

AND WHAT OF YUKIO? IS SHE TRULY DEAD?

LET HER *BURN HERE* AND IN WHATEVER HELL SHE CAME FROM

WE HAVEN'T THE LUXURY OF *TIME* TO MAKE CERTAIN WE MUST BE GONE

RIDE!

TELL ME OF THE MONASTERY AIKO. THEY WOULD TRULY WELCOME A *WOMAN* HERE? A WOMAN OF *MY* PAST?

THESE ARE CURIOUS TIMES, AYA

TAKAIHASHI MONASTERY HAS BECOME MORE THAN A PLACE OF FAITH FOR OBO SAN'S FELLOW MONKS. IT IS A REFUGE AGAINST MITSUMINE'S MADNESS

AS WULF IS WELCOMED HERE SO TOO WILL YOU BE

NOW THAT WE ARE TOGETHER I WILL NOT LEAVE WULF'S SIDE

IS THERE ANYONE FOR *YOU*, AIKO? OR DO YOU PURSUE THE WARRIOR'S WAY *ALONE?*

THERE IS ONE

BUT THERE IS SO MUCH ELSE TO CONSUME HIM

AND I WOULD NEVER PRESUME TO DISTRACT HIM FROM SUCH MATTERS

IT CAN NEVER BE

YOU *HONOR* US BY GREETING OUR RETURN KONOSKE SAN

I MUST SPEAK WITH OBO SAN. WE ENCOUNTERED THE DEMON WITCH YUKO AGAIN

THEN WE ARE DOUBLY GLAD TO SEE YOU SAFELY RETURNED, WULF

BUT I AM AFRAID OBO SAN IS GONE

GONE?

HE HAS DEPARTED FROM TAKAIHASHI IN ORDER TO SEEK SOLITUDE

HE MAKES HIS WAY INTO THE MOUNTAINS

AND THERE HE WILL DECIDE WHAT PATH HE MUST WALK

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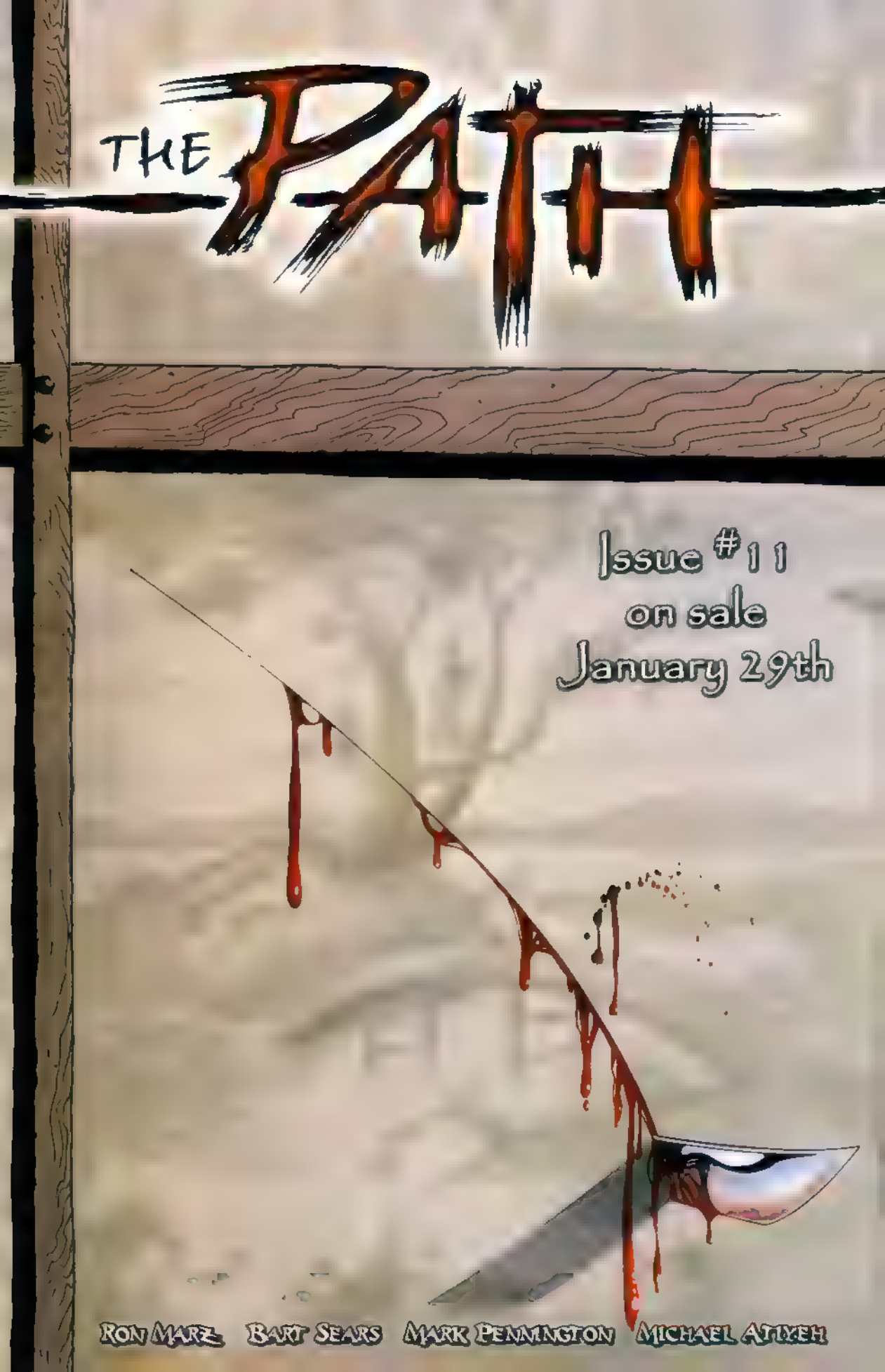
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ON THE PATH...

Emperor Mitsumune, ruler of Nayado, placed a death sentence upon the head of the monk Obo-san for his refusal to surrender the Weapon of Heaven. Obo-san and his companions Wulf and Aiko fled to the temporary safety of a northern monastery. When the army of neighboring Shinacea attacked Nayado, Obo-san used the Weapon of Heaven to destroy the invaders. Afterward, Wulf [illegible] from the Emperor's palace. [illegible] Obo-san had departed to seek solitude.

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WHO ARE YOU?

I TRUST YOUR JOURNEY WAS A PLEASANT ONE, OBO SAN?

PLEASANT ENOUGH SAVE FOR ITS END

I TOLD *NO ONE* WHERE MY JOURNEY WOULD LEAD ME I AM CURIOUS HOW YOU CAME TO BE HERE

AND HOW YOU ARRIVED *BEFORE* I DID

I THOUGHT THIS WOULD BE AN OPPORTUNE TIME FOR US TO HAVE ANOTHER CONVERSATION

IN TRUTH WE DID NOT PROPERLY FINISH THE FIRST

A *CONVERSATION,* THEN WHAT SHALL WE DISCUSS?

YOUR CLAIMS THAT YOU ARE A *MONK* OF THE ORDER TO WHICH I ONCE ADHERED?

OR DO WE NO LONGER NEED THAT PARTICULAR FALSEHOOD?

EVEN BETTER LET US DISCUSS HOW YOU KNOW FAR *MORE* OF ME THAN YOU SHOULD

THAN IS *POSSIBLE*

THAT IS A SUBJECT

I FIND TO BE

OF GREAT INTEREST

IF NOTHING ELSE TELL ME *THIS*

WHAT DO YOU *WANT?*

NO, OBO-SAN THE QUESTION HAS ALWAYS BEEN WHAT DO *YOU* WANT?

IS THAT NOT WHAT YOU HAVE COME HERE TO DECIDE?

YOU PERSIST IN *RIDDLES*, SOJIROJ SA■

I CAME HERE FOR PEACE AND YOU GIVE ME RIDDLES

PEACE?

YOU DID NOT COME HERE FOR *PEACE* YOU CAME TO CHOOSE A PATH BECAUSE YOU ARE *TORN*

YOU WISH TO DESTROY THE GODS TO WHOM YOU ONCE PRAYED, YET YOU USED THEIR WEAPON IN ORDER TO SAVE YOUR NATION FROM INVASION

YOU ARE A MAN OF FAITH THRUST INTO *WAR*

YOU ARE A LOYAL SON OF NAYADO WHO NOW CONTEMPLATES REBELLION

MITSUMUNE WAS MY FRIEND

TO EVEN PONDER REMOVING HIM FROM THE THRONE

YET YOU *DO* PONDER IT

KNOW THIS MITSUMUNE COULD WELL *DESTROY* NAYADO

HE IS NOT WHAT HE SEEMS. WHAT WAS ONCE MADNESS IS NOW SOMETHING FAR MORE SINISTER

OBO SAN YOU ARE AS A RIVER THAT TRIES TO FLOW IN TWO DIRECTIONS AT ONCE

A RIVER MUST FLOW TO THE SEA

ONLY TO THE SEA

I HAVE MET *ANOTHER* LIKE YOU ANOTHER WHO SPEAKS IN RIDDLES

HE CLAIMS TO BE A STORYTELLER

AS *YOU* CLAIM TO BE A SIMPLE MONK

Ah.

HIM YOU DO NOT YET SEE FOR WHAT HE IS. HE MAY BECOME AN ALLY

BUT THAT IS FOR *YOU* TO DECIDE

MORE RIDDLES

I'M SORRY THAT YOU MUST BEAR THE BURDEN INTENDED FOR YOUR BROTHER

BURDEN?

I COULD *PUSH* YOU TO DO WHAT YOU MUST. I HAVE DONE SO FOR OTHERS

BUT WHAT GOOD WOULD YOU BE TO ME THEN?

WHAT GOOD AM I TO ANYONE?

THE IRONY IS *RICH*, IS IT NOT? I AM BRANDED WITH A MARK REPRESENTING EQUAL FORCES IN ETERNAL OPPOSITION

JUST AS I AM TORN BY THE LOYALTIES WITHIN ME

BETTER *I* HAD BEEN SLAIN ON THE FIELD OF BATTLE RATHER THAN TODOSI HE WAS ALWAYS THE STRONGER

HE WOULD NOT BE WRACKED BY THIS SHAMEFUL INDECISION

EVEN THE NATURE OF THE *POWER* GRANTED TO HIM WAS FAR DIFFERENT THAN WHAT I NOW POSSESS

TODOSI BECAME A WARRIOR OF ULTIMATE STRENGTH *I* MERELY BEND THE WILL OF MEN WITH MY VOICE

AND THIS

IS THERE NOT IRONY IN *THIS* AS WELL?

MY ONLY HOPE OF *DESTROYING* THE GODS

IS TO WIELD THEIR VERY WEAPON

I AM *DAMNED*, SOJIROU SAN

I HAVE SWORN TO BE A DESTROYER OF GODS. NOW I MAY WELL BE FORCED TO BE A DESTROYER OF MY LAND AND ITS TRADITIONS

SO AM I TO BE A HERETIC?

A TRAITOR?

BOTH?

JUST AS YOU WEAR THE *MARK* UPON YOUR BACK, ALREADY YOU HAVE TURNED YOUR *BACK* UPON NAYADO'S PAST

YOU MAY NO LONGER BE A RELIGIOUS MAN OBO SAN BUT YOU ARE A *RIGHTEOUS* MAN

IT IS WITHIN YOU TO BE AN INSTRUMENT OF *SALVATION*

I HAVE THE *TOOLS* TO DO THESE THINGS I CONTEMPLATE

BUT I FEAR I DO NOT HAVE THE *RIGHT*

OBO-SAN

WE ARE NOT ALONE

HN?

THE *WEAPON*

WE HAVE COME FOR THE WEAPON AND YOUR *HEAD*, OBO SAN

YOU SHALL DEPART WITH *NEITHER*

NH!

HAAGH!

HHG!

HST

GRGL

HKK!

EEAH!

AGH

HHRG

HGGH!

HHHH

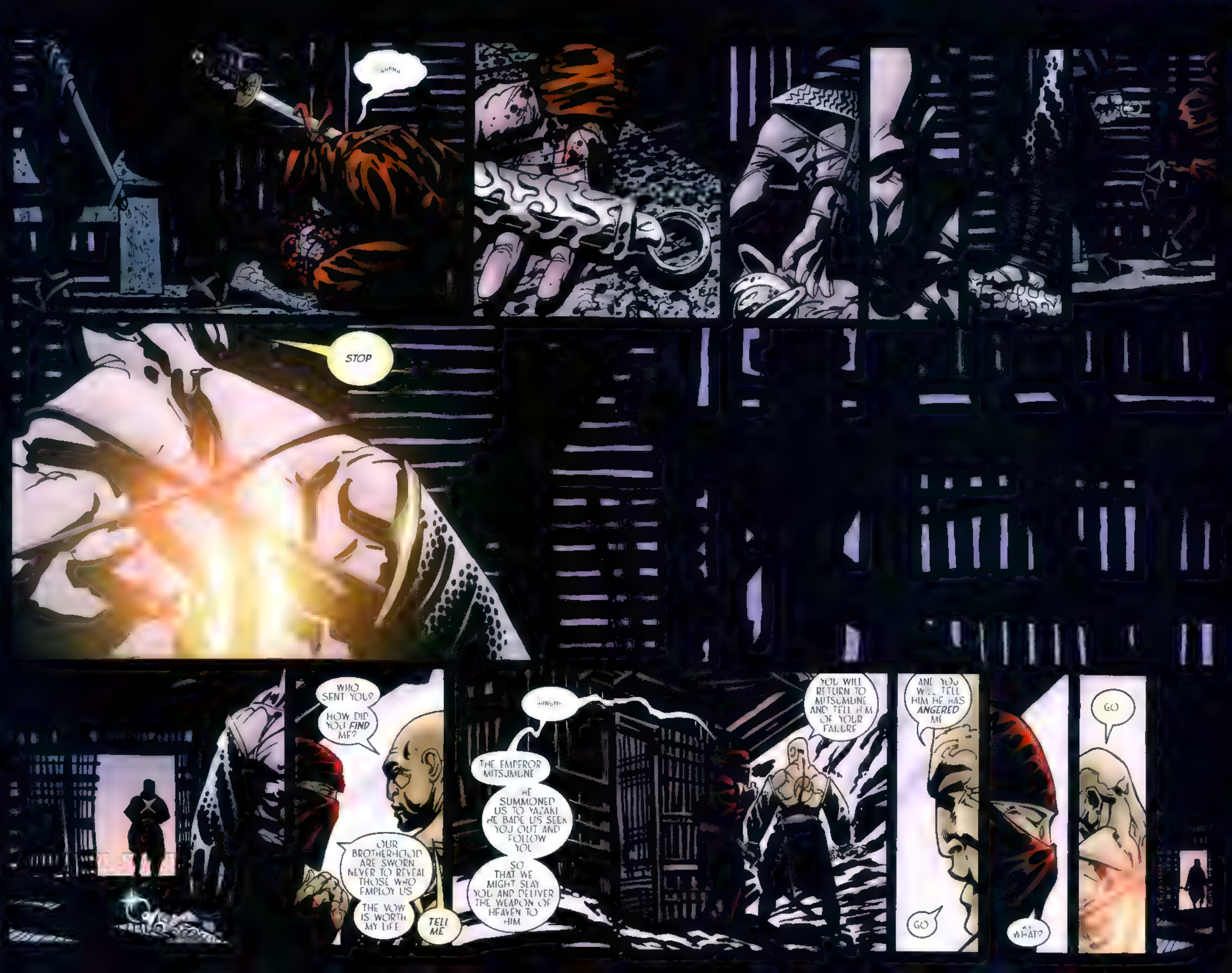
HG

HLRK!

YOU HAVE SLAIN MY BROTHERS

BUT I HOLD THE PRIZE

NO LONGER


WHHNN
STOP
WHO SENT YOU?
HOW DID YOU FIND ME?
OUR BROTHERHOOD ARE SWORN NEVER TO REVEAL THOSE WHO EMPLOY US
THE VOW IS WORTH MY LIFE
TELL ME
THE EMPEROR MITSUMUNE
HE SUMMONED US TO YAZAKI HE BADE US SEEK YOU OUT AND FOLLOW YOU
SO THAT WE MIGHT SLAY YOU AND DELIVER THE WEAPON OF HEAVEN TO HIM
YOU WILL RETURN TO MITSUMUNE AND TELL HIM OF YOUR FAILURE
AND YOU WILL TELL HIM HE HAS ANGERED ME
GO
WHAT?
GO

SOU ROU SAN

YOU WERE OF LITTLE HELP IN THE BATTLE *ALMOST* AS IF YOU WERE NOT HERE AT ALL

MY ROLE HERE IS NOT THAT OF A WARRIOR

THAT FALLS TO *YOU*. ALREADY YOU HAVE MADE A CHARNEL HOUSE OF WHAT WAS ONCE A HOLY PLACE

DO YOU SAY I AM A *MONK* WHO MUST BECOME A WARRIOR?

OR A *WARRIOR* WHO HAS ONLY MASQUERADED AS A MONK?

IN TRUTH, WHAT IS THE *DIFFERENCE?*

YOU CAME HERE TO DECIDE WHAT PATH YOU WILL WALK IN THE FUTURE. *WILL* YOU FOMENT REBELLION?

I CAME HERE FOR SOLITUDE

I CAME IN SEARCH OF A TRANQUIL MIND

I FOUND *NEITHER*

BUT HAVE YOU DECIDED WHAT YOU WILL DO OBO SAN?

YES

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THUS FAR

ON THE PATH...

Emperor Mitsumune, ruler of Nayado, placed a death sentence upon the head of the monk Obo-san for his refusal to surrender the Weapon of Heaven. Obo-san and his companions Wulf and Aiko fled to the temporary safety of a northern monastery. When the army of neighboring Shinacea attacked Nayado, Obo-san used the Weapon of Heaven to destroy the invaders. Obo-san then journeyed to a remote mountain retreat in order to contemplate the future. Once there, a force of ninjas [illegible] Mitsumune's [illegible] destruction threatened, but were [illegible] by Obo-san.

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WULF-SAN

YAMA SAN

SEE WHAT I HAVE CAUGHT WULF SAN

I HAVE A CRICKET

YOUR CRICKET IS VERY FINE

YES, I THINK SO AS WELL

WULF SAN YOU BROUGHT A LADY HERE

I DID

THAT LADY IS VERY PRETTY

YES SHE IS

DO YOU LIKE HER?

YES

DOES SHE LIKE YOU?

YES

THEN THAT IS GOOD

THE CRICKET IS VERY SMALL

IT MUST BE STRANGE, TO BE SO SMALL

WHERE IS OBO SAN?
HE WENT AWAY
TO *THINK*
Oh
WILL HE BE HAPPIER?
WHAT?
WILL HE BE *HAPPIER?*
OBO-SAN
HE USED TO BE HAPPY WHEN HE CAME HERE BEFORE HE WAS HAPPY
HE WOULD SMILE AND LAUGH AND BE ***HAPPY*** HE S NOT LIKE THAT ANYMORE
HE SEEMS
SAD NOW
OBO SAN HAS A GREAT MANY THINGS ON HIS MIND YAMA
LIKE WHAT?
MANY OF THE THINGS OBO SAN ONCE ***BELIEVED IN*** HE BELIEVES IN NO LONGER
HE CARRIES A ***TERRIBLE WEAPON,*** AND HE MUST DECIDE IF HE WILL USE IT
HE MUST DECIDE WHETHER WE WILL GO TO ***WAR***
I HAVE BEEN TO WAR
I DID NOT LIKE IT IT WAS A BAD THING
WE WENT TO WAR AGAINST INVADERS FROM SHINACEA WHO SOUGHT TO CONQUER NAYADO
WE DID WHAT WAS NECESSARY TO PROTECT OUR LAND
YOU FOUGHT BRAVELY YAMA
BUT THIS WOULD BE DIFFERENT
IN THIS WAR WE WOULD FIGHT AGAINST SOLDIERS OF NAYADO
WHY WOULD WE DO *THAT?*
IT S COMPLICATED
THAT IS WHY OBO SAN HAS GONE AWAY TO THINK ABOUT IT
I HOPE HE S HAPPIER WHEN HE COMES BACK

I was born thirty-three winters ago,
second son of the daimyo of the Tsugawa clan.

My brother's death has made me
the last of the Tsugawas.
It is likely my line dies with me.

My given name, Nobuyuki,
was set aside many years ago
when I turned from the way
of the warrior.

Though I was raised to obey
the tenets of the samurai
and know the dotanuki and
the wakazashi, I set those
aside as well.

I became a man of religion
and devoted myself to the
pursuit of enlightenment.

But that has proven a false path.
Now I search for another to walk.

And the survival of my nation
depends upon the path I choose.

My father was Tsugawa Toyo. From him I learned duty and devotion.

When the Noganva clan fomented the Wada Rebellion, my father pledged the might of Tsugawa to the Emperor's cause.

I was little more than a child at the time. My brother, six years my senior, donned ancestral armor and went to war at my father's side.

It is no boast to say we Tsugawas were the difference in keeping the Ohira Dynasty upon the Throne of Petals. But the cost to us was great.

My father was slain at the decisive Battle of Nara-no-Goro. In retribution for their defeat, the Noganvas burned our ancestral estate in Kojima Province to the ground.

We did not question the sacrifices. We had been loyal to the dynasty for two centuries. It was the way of things.

Now an Emperor of my generation sits upon the throne at Yazaki. Once Mitsumune was a just man of even temper. Once he was my friend.

But now he is possessed by madness. Or perhaps by something far worse that I dare not bring myself to contemplate.

Mitsumune has placed a death sentence upon my head because I defied him.

I did so because I fear that in his madness he will destroy Nayado.

We are a people of loyalty.

We are taught from birth that we are to follow our Emperor and obey his edicts without question. It has always been so.

Yet what is the true nature of loyalty? Am I most loyal if I blindly obey my Emperor, even though he may well lead Nayado to ruin?

Or is there a greater loyalty in defying him, and in doing so sparing Nayado?

Our lives are ruled by tradition. Without it, we are as a rudderless craft tossed upon heaving seas.

Tradition binds us to those who have come before, and to those who will come after. Tradition preserves who we are, and so must be preserved.

Tradition demands obedience. But if that obedience leads to destruction, is not tradition destroyed as well?

If I would be a savior, I must be a heretic.

That is the weight upon me. Can I stand idle while Nayado plunges toward oblivion?

I learned the code of the samurai when I was barely old enough to hold a blade. It demands death before dishonor.

Can the same be true of a whole nation? An entire people?

Nayado's four islands are the most beautiful of all the lands upon the face of Han-Jin, bright green gems set in azure.

Nayado is a mountain capped in white, even in summer.

Raked pebbles in a dry garden.

The reflection of the crane as it stands in the tide.

Air redolent with the scent of cherry blossom.

Nayado is all these things.

Too often the land has been scarred by the ugliness of war, fields of flowers drowned in blood and trampled by the hooves of war steeds.

Again, the dilemma. If I am to save Nayado, I must be willing to inflict such terrible wounds upon it.

It is the people
who will suffer.

They will suffer if I act.
They will suffer if I do not act.
Worthy of a koan, is it not?

Newborn to eldest sage,
noble samurai to the peasants
who pull rice from the paddies,
all will be touched by
what is to come.

It falls to me
to damn them
or deliver them.

The future crouches
just over the horizon,
nearly upon us and yet
hidden from me.

My nation faces either a final twilight or a new dawn.

I know not which.

HE RETURNS

OBO SAN S AMONG US ONCE AGAIN

IS HE WELL?

UNHARMED?

IT WOULD SEEM SO, BUT I HAVE ONLY SEEN HIM FROM THE WALLS

AND HAS HE MADE A DECISION?

HE *RETURNS*, AIKO MORE THAN THAT I CANNOT SAY

IF YOU AND THE LADY AYA WOULD KNOW *MORE*, ACCOMPANY ME

AIKO

I AM AN OUTSIDER IN THIS AND AND WILL NEVER TRULY UNDERSTAND YOUR WAYS

BUT IN *MY* HOMELAND WE *SPEAK* THE THINGS THAT ARE IN OUR HEARTS. YOU MUST *TELL* OBO-SAN OF YOUR FEELINGS FOR HIM

TOO OFTEN WHAT REMAINS UNSPOKEN GOES FOREVER UNKNOWN

I WILL EXCUSE YOUR PRESUMPTION BECAUSE YOU ARE A FOREIGNER

WHAT I FEEL FOR OBO SAN IS LOYALTY

LOYALTY TO HIM, LOYALTY FOR THE TSUGAWA CLAN, WHICH TOOK ME IN AND RAISED ME AS ONE OF THEIR OWN WHEN I WAS ORPHANED

I REMAIN AT OBO SAN S SIDE BECAUSE DUTY DEMANDS THAT IT BE SO

THAT S ALL

Ah OF COURSE

THERE

MY FRIENDS

KUNAI

I LEFT YOU IN ORDER TO SEEK SOLITUDE, SO THAT I MIGHT FIND THE INNER PEACE TO DECIDE WHAT PATH OUR FUTURE MUST TAKE

MY SOLITUDE WAS INTERRUPTED BY ***SHADOW WARRIORS*** IN THE EMPLOY OF THE EMPEROR MITSUMUNE. THEY SOUGHT TO DESTROY ME, BECAUSE MITSUMUNE FEARS I AM A THREAT TO HIM

HE IS CORRECT IN THINKING SO

IN THE TIME SINCE, I HAVE WANDERED NAYADO, I HAVE SEEN ITS LAND AND ITS PEOPLE, AND REMINDED MYSELF OF HOW PRECIOUS THEY ARE

I HAVE PONDERED OUR TRADITIONS WE ARE STRONG AND HONORABLE BECAUSE OF THEM

ONCE IT WOULD HAVE BEEN UNTHINKABLE TO ME TO SPEAK ***REBELLION,*** OF TOPPLING HE WHO SITS UPON THE THRONE OF PETALS

BUT I HAVE COME TO BELIEVE CIRCUMSTANCES SOMETIMES DEMAND TRADITION BE CAST ASIDE

MITSUMUNE IS MAD HE WILL ***DESTROY*** ALL THAT WE ARE

AND ***THAT*** I WILL NOT RISK

NAYADO MUST BE PRESERVED

NO MATTER THE COST

MITSUMUNE MUST FALL

WE GO TO WAR

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THE PATH®

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Thus Far On

The Path

Emperor Mitsumune, ruler of the feudal kingdom of Nayado, has placed a death sentence upon the head of the monk Obo-san for his refusal to surrender the Weapon of Heaven. Mitsumune, resurrected from the dead and seemingly mad, covets the power of the Weapon, an object of terrible might left behind by the gods. These are the same gods against whom Obo-san has sworn vengeance for the death of his brother, the warlord Todosi.

In addition to Mitsumune, Emperor Zheng of the hungry and corrupt empire of Shinacea also seeks the Weapon of Heaven. Zheng is served by the demon-woman Yukio, who masquerades as a courtesan in Mistumune's palace. Having retreated to a monastery with his companions Wulf and Aiko, Obo-san has decided rebellion and the overthrow of Mitsumune is the only way to preserve his beloved homeland.

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LEGEND HAS IT THAT NAYADO WAS CREATED WHEN THE GOD ATTU WAS CAPTURED BY THE DEMON HAKKU AND TAKEN TO THE UNDERWORLD HAKKU TORTURED ATTU, DEMANDING TO KNOW THE WAY INTO HEAVEN SO THAT HE COULD FIND AND SLAY ATTU'S FAMILY

BUT ATTU WOULD NOT GIVE UP HIS SECRETS INSTEAD, HE CHOSE DEATH BEFORE THE DISHONOR OF BETRAYING HIS FAMILY, AND COMMITTED SUICIDE WHERE ATTU'S BLOOD FELL, THE ISLANDS OF NAYADO CAME INTO BEING

THE OHIRA CLAN HAS HELD NAYADO'S THRONE OF PETALS FOR MORE THAN TWO CENTURIES THE EMPEROR MITSUMUNE NOW SITS UPON THE THRONE

MORE THAN A DECADE AGO, BANDITS IN THE NORTHERN PROVINCES THREATENED THE STABILITY OF THE YOUNG MITSUMUNE'S RULE IF THE EMPEROR COULD NOT PROTECT HIS PEOPLE FROM MERE BRIGANDS, PERHAPS HE WAS NOT FIT TO HOLD THE THRONE AT ALL

IN TRUTH, AND UNKNOWN TO MITSUMUNE, THE BANDITS WERE DISGUISED SAMURAI OF THE NOGAWA CLAN'S PRIVATE ARMY THE NOGAWAS HAD BEEN ENEMIES OF THE OHIRAS FOR CENTURIES, AND WERE THEIR CHIEF RIVALS FOR CONTROL OF THE THRONE

THE NOGAWA RUSE WAS INTENDED TO SOW THE SEEDS OF DISCONTENT IN THE PEOPLE AND DESTABILIZE THE MONARCHY THEIR HOPE WAS TO DRAW IMPERIAL FORCES NORTH TO BE MASSACRED, WEAKENING THE ARMY FOR THEIR PLANNED REBELLION

MITSUMUNE SUMMONED A BOYHOOD FRIEND, TODOSI OF THE TSUGAWA CLAN, THEN A LIEUTENANT IN HIS ARMY HE ASKED TODOSI TO ADDRESS THE MATTER OF THE BANDITS WITH PREJUDICE

BEING A FAITHFUL SERVANT, TODOSI AGREED, AND MARCHED NORTH UNDER THE IMPERIAL CREST

THE SUPPOSED BANDITS MET TODOSI AND HIS TROOPS ON A FOREST TRAIL, A NARROW PLACE RIPE FOR AMBUSH.

TODOSI'S DETACHMENT WAS SMALL, FAR OUTNUMBERED BY OPPONENTS WHOSE CLAN ARMOR GLINTED BENEATH CHEAP KIMONOS.

TODOSI HAD BEEN LURED INTO A TRAP, JUST AS THE NOGAWAS HAD INTENDED, FOR SURPRISE IS ALWAYS THE MOST OVERWHELMING OF ADVANTAGES.

FOR THEIR PART, THE NOGAWAS WERE DOUBLY PLEASED, FOR THE TSUGAWA CLAN ALSO HAD LONG BEEN AN OBJECT OF THEIR ENMITY.

HERE, THEN, WAS A CHANCE TO STRIKE A BLOW AGAINST TWO OF THEIR FOES OF OLD.

It seemed the young lieutenant who showed such promise had blundered. And the price would be his head.

The Nogawa soldiers closed, tightening a noose meant to strangle Todosi's forces and the monarchy itself.

Yet Todosi was patient, as bait always must be.

With the Nogawas gathered and already counting their triumph...

...the remainder of Todosi's men appeared, those he had held in reserve and secreted in the forest.

They melted from the trees like shadows...

...and delivered death in whispers on the wind.

For surprise is always the most overwhelming of advantages.

TAKEN UNAWARES, THE NOGAWAS WERE SLAUGHTERED TO A MAN...

...A GREAT MANY OF THEM FALLING TO TODOSI'S BLADE, DYING AS THEY TASTED THEIR OWN BLOOD.

THE BATTLE WAS DECISIVE.

THE NOGAWAS WERE BROKEN AS A POWER FOR YEARS TO COME, THE SHARPNESS OF THEIR DECLINE MATCHED BY THAT OF TODOSI'S ASCENT.

HE ROSE THROUGH THE MILITARY'S RANKS, LIFTED UP BY HIS BRAVERY AND TACTICAL GENIUS.

IT WAS ON THAT DAY THAT TODOSI TOOK THE FIRST STEP TOWARD BECOMING WARLORD OF ALL NAYADO...

AND YOU WEL. KNOW HIS ACCOMP.ISHMENTS IN *THAT* ROLE, MY MASTER
TODOSI WAS LONG A THORN IN THE SIDE OF GREAT SHINACEA HIS *DEATH* PLEASED ME GREATLY
AND NOW IT SEEMS HIS *BROTHER* FOLLOWS N HIS FOOTSTEPS, EMPEROR ZHENG
BUT WHY DO YOU TELL ME *ANY* OF THIS, YUKIO?
AS I HAVE SAID, I AM *DONE* WITH NAYADO

I TELL YOU THIS BECAUSE I HAVE THE SOLUTION TO YOUR DIFFICULTIES WITH NAYAPO, MY MASTER
THE SKULL OF TOPOSI
I PROMISED YOU IT WOULD HAVE ITS USES IN THE FUTURE
THIS IS A DISCUSSION WE HAVE HAD BEFORE, YUKIO
WHAT WOULD YOU HAVE ME *DO* WITH A DEAD MAN'S SKULL?
HE NEED NOT *REMAIN* A DEAD MAN
NOW YOU INTRIGUE ME, DEMON
WHAT IS IT YOU PROPOSE?

YOU STILL DESIRE THE WEAPON OF HEAVEN, DO YOU NOT?
I COVET ITS POWER
BUT MY EFFORTS TO OBTAIN IT HAVE PROVEN DISASTROUS. I HAVE SPENT TOO MANY MEN IN ITS PURSUIT
THE WEAPON RESTS WITH TODOSI'S BROTHER THE MONK OBO-SAN
WHO BETTER TO TAKE IT FROM HIM THAN TODOSI
ACTING AS YOUR SERVANT
I WOULD CRUSH NAYADO IF I CONTROLLED THE WEAPON
I WOULD LEAVE NO TWO STONES TOGETHER, NOT ONE THING STILL LIVING UPON THOSE DAMNABLE ISLANDS!
ALL THAT YOU WISH IS POSSIBLE
I, TOO, HAVE REASON TO WISH NAYADO LAID WASTE
AND YOU CAN MAKE THIS COME TO PASS?
Oh, MY MASTER
SORCERY IS IN THE BLOOD OF MY KIND

SO YOU HAVE CHOSEN THE WAY OF THE SWORD FOR US, OBO SAN
NO, WULF
I HAVE CHOSEN THE WAY OF THE SWORD FOR MYSELF
EACH OF YOU MUST DO AS YOUR CONSCIENCE DICTATES
I WILL DO AS MY HONOR DICTATES
I STAND WITH YOU
YOUR FAMILY HAS EARNED MY LOYALTY, EVEN UNTO DEATH
WE TOLD YOU WHEN YOU RETURNED TO TAKAHASHI THAT WE STAND WITH YOU, OBO SAN
THOUGH YOU HAVE SET ASIDE YOUR FAITH, WE REMAIN YOUR BROTHERS

I THANK YOU, KONOSKE-SAN
I THANK ALL OF YOU
I DO NOT *WISH* THIS REBELLION, BUT IT MUST BE DONE IF NAYADO IS TO BE PRESERVED
AGREED
BUT IT MUST BE SAID THAT *FORTY-SEVEN* MONKS AND THE THREE OF *YOU* ARE NOT ENOUGH TO TOPPLE EMPEROR MITSUMUNE
MAD THOUGH HE MAY BE
Ah, BUT YOU FORGET
WE HAVE MIGHTY YAMA ON OUR SIDE
Heh.
INDEED, WULF WE HAVE MIGHTY YAMA ON OUR SIDE
OBO SAN, OUR NUMBERS ARE TRAGICALLY FEW FOR THIS THING WE UNDERTAKE
I MUST ASK YOU
WILL YOU USE THE WEAPON OF HEAVEN IN OUR CAUSE?
THE WEAPON CUT DOWN THE SHINACEAN INVADERS LIKE RIPE STALKS BEFORE THE SCYTHE
IT IS A THING OF TERRIBLE POWER
BUT IT IS UNCLEAN
I CANNOT BRING MYSELF TO UNLEASH IT AGAINST SONS OF NAYADO
AGAINST MITSUMUNE, WHEN THE TIME COMES
PERHAPS
OBO SAN, THE ARMY OF NAYADO SUFFERED GRIEVOUS LOSSES AGAINST THE SHINACEAN DOGS
THOUGH IT IS A PALE SHADOW OF WHAT IT ONCE WAS, IT WILL STILL BE FORMIDABLE

WE MUST KNOW THE NUMBERS WE WILL FACE
YOUR POINT IS WELL TAKEN, AIKO.
THE LADY AYA WAS LAST IN YAZAKI, AND HAS BETTER KNOWLEDGE OF MITSUMUNE'S AFFAIRS THAN ANY OF US
I WILL TELL YOU WHAT I KNOW, OBO-SAN. BUT I WAS MERELY A COURTESAN, AND NOT PRIVY TO ALL THINGS
RYUICHI REMAINS WARLORD OF THE ARMIES.
WHEN HE RETURNED FROM THE BATTLE WITH THE SHINACEANS HE EXPECTED TO FORFEIT HIS LIFE BUT MITSUMUNE SPARED HIM
RYUICHI HAS BEEN CHARGED WITH REBUILDING NAYADO'S MILITARY
HE HAS DEMANDED MORE SAMURAI FROM THE PRIVATE ARMIES OF THE DAIMYOS, AND BEGUN THE CONSCRIPTION OF COMMONERS
I WOULD GUESS HIS ARMY STANDS AT FIVE THOUSAND MEN, AND GROWS BY THE DAY
OBO SAN, IF YOU WILL NOT USE THE WEAPON AGAINST THOSE OF NAYADO
AND I DO NOT DISAGREE WITH YOU IN THIS
WE MUST HAVE AN ARMY. WHERE DO YOU THINK TO GET IT?
WE WILL GATHER TO OUR CAUSE THOSE WHO BELIEVE AS WE DO
MORE THAN THAT, WE WILL RECRUIT THE BORU OF THE NORTH
AND THE NOGAWAS

WHAT?
THE CURS OF THE NOGAWA CLAN ARE THE BITTEREST OF YOUR FAMILY'S ENEMIES.
THEY WOULD SOONER DESTROY YOU THAN AID YOUR CAUSE!
OBO-SAN, YOU CANNOT BE TRULY CONTEMPLATING SUCH A THING.
TIMES SUCH AS THESE MAKE FOR CURIOUS ALLIANCES.
THE NOGAWAS HATRED OF MY FAMILY IS EXCEEDED BY THEIR DESIRE FOR POWER.
THAT CAN BE USED TO OUR ADVANTAGE.
I WILL FIRST JOURNEY TO OUR ESTATE IN KOJIMA PROVINCE AND PAY A VISIT TO MY SICKLY MOTHER.
I HAVE NEGLECTED HER FAR TOO LONG.
THEN I WILL GO TO THE NOGAWAS AND FORGE AN ALLIANCE WITH THEM.
YOU WILL BE LUCKY IF THE NOGAWAS DON'T CUT OFF YOUR HEAD AND MOUNT IT ON THEIR GATES, OBO-SAN.
IF YOU ARE COMMITTED TO THIS, AT LEAST LET ME ACCOMPANY YOU.
I AM APPRECIATIVE OF YOUR OFFER, WULF, BUT THE MARK I BEAR ALLOWS ME TO BEND THE WILL OF MEN IT IS ENOUGH.
I GO ALONE SO THAT THE RISK WILL BE MINE ALONE.
I HAVE OTHER TASKS FOR YOU.
AIKO, YOU AND WULF WILL GO TO THE BORU AND ATTEMPT TO SWAY THEM TO OUR CAUSE.
KONOSKE-SAN, YOU AND OUR BROTHER MONKS MUST PREPARE FOR WHAT IS TO COME. FIRE THE FORGES AND BEGIN THE MAKING OF ARMS AND ARMOR.
WILL YOU DO THESE THINGS FOR ME?

WE WILL BEGIN IMMEDIATELY
IT WILL BE AS YOU ASK, OBO SAN
I AM GRATEFUL FOR YOUR LOYALTY
I WILL LEAVE ON THE MORROW

OBO-SAN I WOULD SPEAK WITH YOU, IF YOU HAVE A MOMENT TO SPARE FOR ME
OF COURSE AIKO
I WISH TO ACCOMPANY YOU ON YOUR JOURNEY
THE ESTATE WAS MY HOME FOR MANY YEARS AS WELL, AND I WOULD VISIT IT AGAIN
AND.
YOU WILL NEED SOMEONE AT YOUR BACK WHEN YOU VENTURE INTO NOGAWA LANDS
I AM SORRY, AIKO, BUT MY ANSWER MUST BE NO
I NEED YOU TO GO WITH WULF TO THE BORU
YAMA COULD ACCOMPANY WULF
THE BORU ARE LIKELY TO REACT BETTER TO AN OUTSIDER AND A SIMPLETON THAN SOMEONE WHO HAS BEEN ASSOCIATED WITH ONE OF THE NOBLE CLANS

PLEASE, OBO SAN ALLOW ME TO BE AT YOUR SIDE
VERY WELL, AIKO I AM HONORED BY YOUR COMPANY
PLEASE INFORM WULF OF THE CHANGE IN TRAVELING COMPANIONS WE SHALL DEPART AT FIRST LIGHT
THANK YOU, OBO-SAN
SO, OBO-SAN

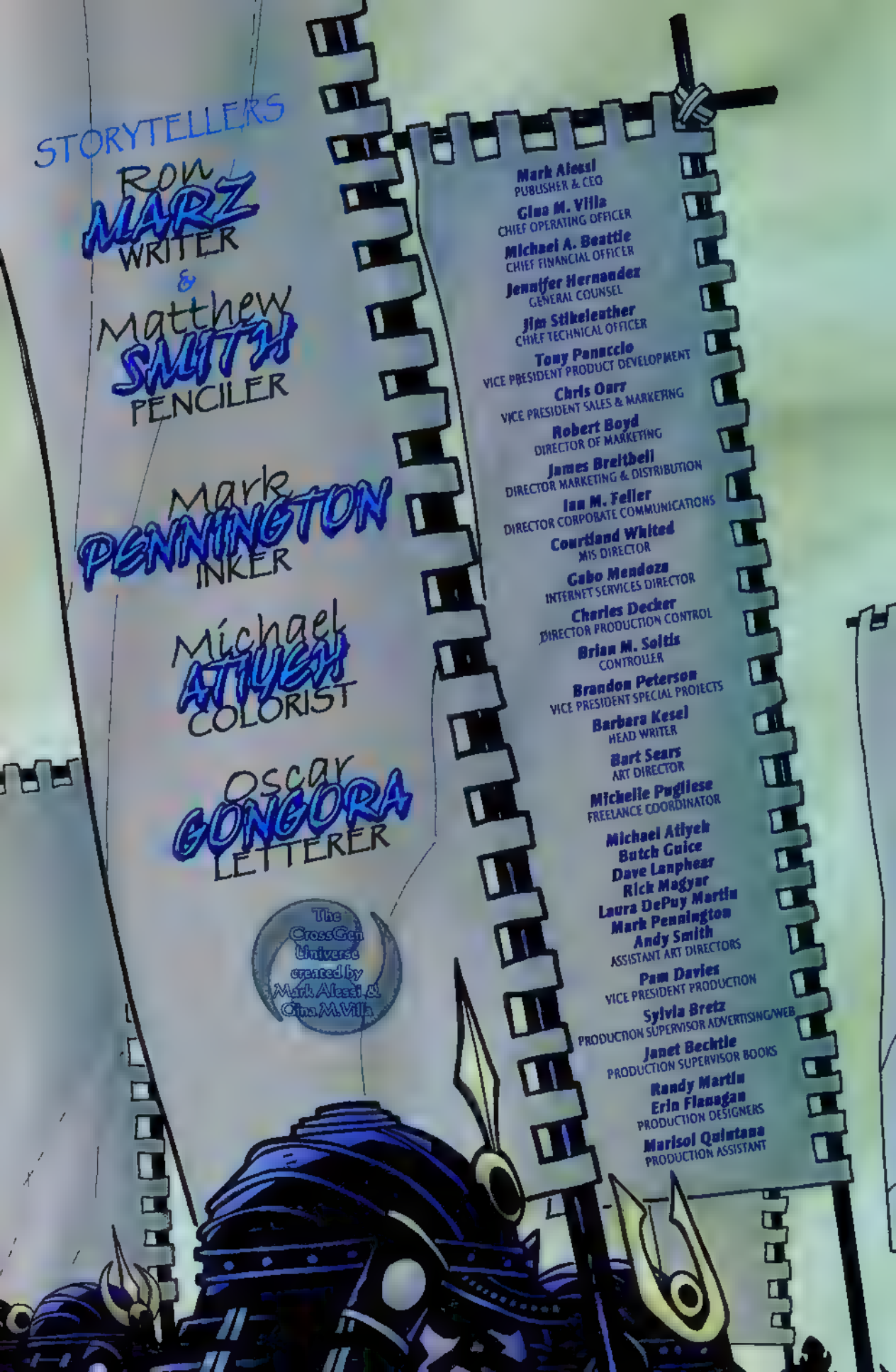
TOMORROW YOU TAKE THE FIRST STEPS ON THE PATH YOU HAVE CHOSEN FOR YOURSELF
IT WOULD SEEM SO, STORY TELLER
I HOPE YOU HAVE ENJOYED THE COMFORTS THE MONASTERY OFFERS.
I'M AFRAID OUR ACCOMMODATIONS ARE SPARE AND SIMPLE
I AM QUITE COMFORTABLE, THANK YOU.
I HAVE ADJUSTED TO MANY DIFFERENT SETTINGS
PERHAPS YOU'D CARE TO SIT WITH ME
PERHAPS YOU'D CARE TO WALK WITH ME
I WONDER NOW THAT YOU HAVE SPENT SOME AMOUNT OF TIME WITH US IF YOU'D LIKE TO OFFER YOUR NAME?
I HAVE TOLD YOU, OBO SAN MY NAME IS OF NO IMPORTANCE
AS YOU WISH, THEN
I CAME TO NAYADO BECAUSE THERE WAS A TALE UNFOLDING HERE
YOUR TALE
I WOULD LIKE TO JOIN YOU ON THE JOURNEY YOU BEGIN TOMORROW

I'M AFRAID I MUST REFUSE
I HAVE ALLOWED MYSELF TO BE PERSUADED OTHERWISE ONCE NOT AGAIN
BUT HOW AM I TO KNOW YOUR STORY IF YOU WILL NOT PERMIT ME TO BEAR WITNESS TO IT?
YOU SEEM TO KNOW *MUCH* ABOUT ME THAT YOU DID NOT WITNESS.
I EXPECT YOU WILL HAVE LITTLE DIFFICULTY IN THIS
WHAT OF YOUR VOW TO DESTROY THE *GODS*, THOSE RESPONSIBLE FOR YOUR BROTHER'S DEATH?
HOW WILL YOU ACCOMPLISH *THAT* WHILE YOU BEND YOUR EFFORTS TO OVERTHROWING MITSUMUNE?
PRESERVING NAYADO MUST TAKE PRECEDENCE OVER MY PERSONAL VENGEANCE
EACH TASK IN ITS OWN TIME
I MUST WARN YOU, OBO-SAN, DESTROYING THOSE YOU DEEM GODS MAY NOT BE AS EASY AS YOU BELIEVE
EVEN *WITH* THE WEAPON YOU POSSESS
I NEVER PRESUMED SUCH A THING WOULD BE EASY
BUT I *WILL* CARRY OUT THAT WHICH I HAVE VOWED
THEN THE GODS INDEED HAVE REASON TO FEAR YOU

HOW SOON?
THIS IS NOT A SIMPLE PROCESS, MY MASTER
IF EVEN A SMALL ASPECT OF THE RITUAL WERE TO BE PERFORMED INCORRECTLY, YOU WOULD BE
MOST UNHAPPY...
WITH THE CONSEQUENCES
PATIENCE

ARISE

AND AGAIN WALK THE LAND OF THE LIVING, TODOS!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In addition to Mitsumune, Emperor Zheng of the empire of Shinacea also seeks the Weapon. Zheng is served by the demon-woman Yukio, who masquerades as a courtesan in Mitsumune's palace. Having retreated to a monastery with his companions Wulf and Aiko, Obo-san has decided to rebel against Mitsumune in order to preserve his homeland. While Obo-san and Aiko set off for his ancestral estate, Yukio raised Todosi from the dead to do her bidding.

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HE'S COMING!
THE MASTER APPROACHES ON THE ROAD!
WHERE IS SHITOMI SAN?

HE WAITS WITHIN
SHITOMI-SAN!
SHITOMI SAN, THE MASTER IS –
YES FUKIDO I HEARD YOU
I HEARD YOU FROM THE COURTYARD
CALM YOURSELF
ALL S :N READINESS IS IT NOT?
YES, CHAMBERLAIN, AL S N READINESS
THEN BY ALL MEANS

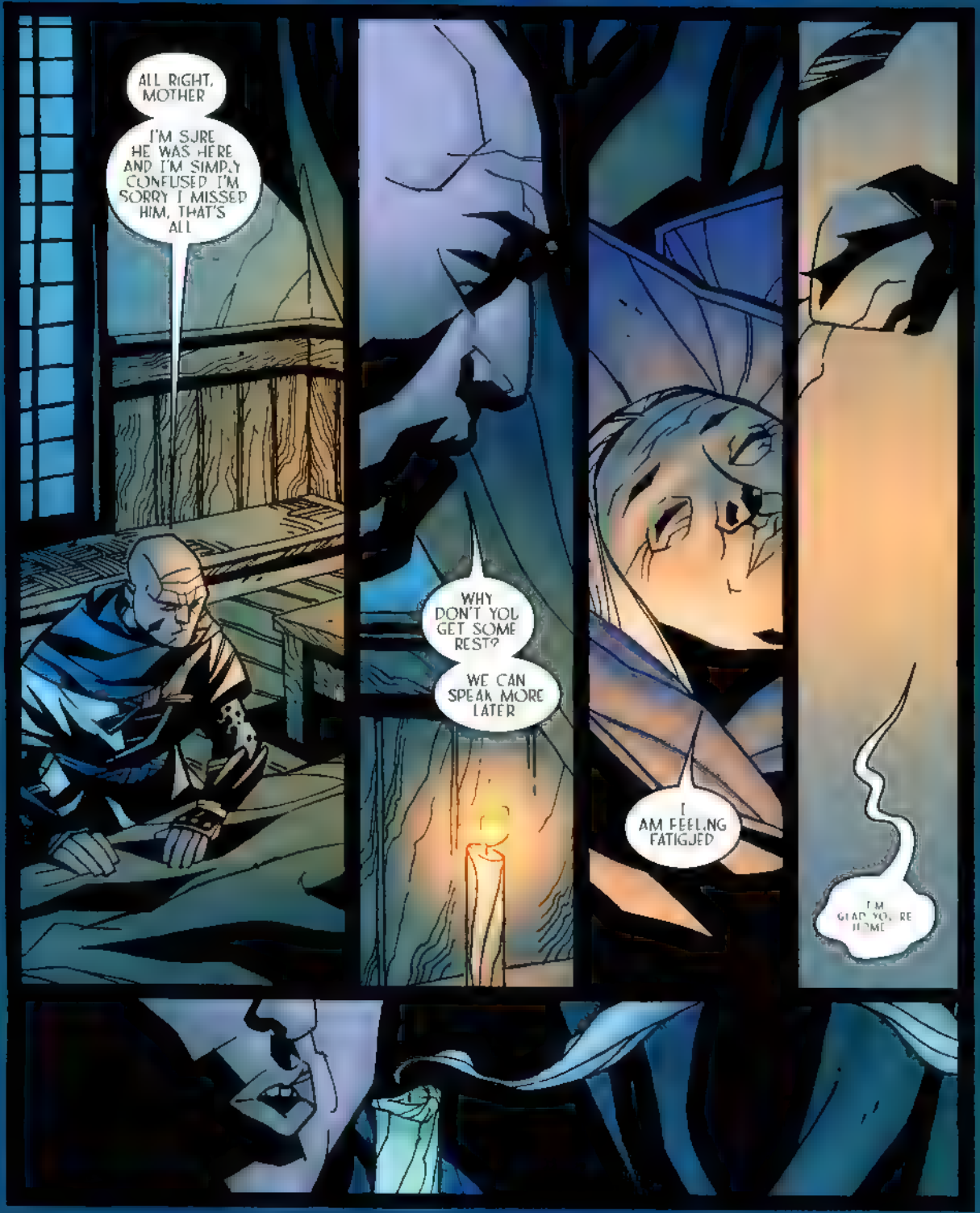
"OPEN THE GATES"
WELCOME HOME MASTER
AND TO YOU AS WELL, LADY AIKO

GREETINGS, LORD OBO SAN THE TSUGAWA ESTATE IS ALL THE BETTER FOR YOUR PRESENCE
AND I AM ALL THE BETTER FOR *BEING* HERE
HOW IS MY FAMILY'S CHAMBERLAIN?
YOU *HONOR* ME WITH YOUR INQUIRY, LORD
I AM WELL
I APOLOGIZE FOR SUCH FOUL WEATHER, LORD IT CANNOT HAVE MADE YOUR JOURNEY A PLEASANT ONE
NONSENSE SHITOMI SAN
WEATHER SUCH AS THIS MAKES US APPRECIATE THE SUN WHEN IT *DOES* CHOOSE TO SHINE
LADY AIKO, IT IS GOOD TO HAVE YOU WITHIN THESE WALLS AGAIN
THANK YOU, SHITOMI SAN
I AM PLEASED TO SEE YOU AS WELL
TELL ME OF MY *MOTHER*, SHITOMI SAN
MY LORD, I AM AFRAID THE NEWS IS ILL

THE LADY TSUGAWA'S CONDITION WORSENS, AND I AM NOT HOPEFUL OF RECOVERY
THE DISEASE THAT WASTES HER BODY NOW BEGINS TO AFFECT HER MIND SHE SUFFERS EPISODES OF *DELIRIUM*
SHE SEES THINGS THAT ARE NOT THERE, THINGS THAT CANNOT POSSIBLY *BE*
I WOULD BE LESS THAN TRUTHFUL, LORD, IF I DID NOT TELL YOU THAT I BELIEVE SHE HAS *LITTLE* TIME REMAINING TO HER
I AM SORRY I MUST BEAR THIS NEWS TO YOU
WHAT IS, *IS*, SHITOMI SAN
IS SHE *AWAKE*, THAT I MIGHT SEE HER?
SHE IS AWAKE AND RESTING COMFORTABLY THIS IS ONE OF HER BETTER DAYS IN SOME TIME
AS IF SHE KNEW YOU WOULD COME TODAY
THEN I WILL GO TO HER
DO YOU WISH ME TO ACCOMPANY YOU OBO-SAN?
I DO THIS ALONE, AIKO I DO NOT WISH TO OVERTAX MY MOTHER
PERHAPS LATER
OF COURSE
SHITOMI-SAN, PLEASE SEE TO THE LADY AIKO'S COMFORT

MOTHER?
I HOPE I DIDN'T WAKE YOU
NOBUYUKI
NO, I WAS WAITING FOR YOU MY SON
COME HERE AND LET ME SEE YOU
YOU ARE STILL MY HANDSOME BOY AREN'T YOU?
BUT I DO MISS YOUR LOVELY HAIR
IT'S BEEN FAR TOO LONG SINCE YOU HAVE BEEN HOME
YES MOTHER I APOLOGIZE
HOW DO YOU FEEL MOTHER? SHITOMI SAN TELLS ME YOU ARE IN DISCOMFORT
GOOD DAYS AND BAD, NOBUYUKI
GOOD DAYS AND BAD

BUT I FEEL BETTER NOW THAT *BOTH* OF MY SONS HAVE RETURNED TO ME
BOTH?
BUT MOTHER, THAT'S IMPOSSIBLE
TODOSI PERISHED ON THE BATTLEFIELD. I SENT WORD OF IT TO YOU
SURELY YOU MUST REMEMBER
YES
YES, I DO REMEMBER THAT
BUT YOU MUST HAVE BEEN MISTAKEN
TODOSI WAS HERE. HE VISITED ME
HE WAS ALWAYS SUCH A GOOD SON ESPECIALLY AFTER YOUR FATHER DIED.
MOTHER, I AM SORRY, BUT I AM CERTAIN OF TODOSI'S DEATH IN BATTLE. I *WITNESSED* IT
I ATTENDED HIS FUNERAL IN YAZAKI
WELL HE *WAS* HERE
I AM CERTAIN OF IT


ALL RIGHT, MOTHER
I'M SURE HE WAS HERE AND I'M SIMPLY CONFUSED. I'M SORRY I MISSED HIM, THAT'S ALL
WHY DON'T YOU GET SOME REST?
WE CAN SPEAK MORE LATER
I AM FEELING FATIGUED
I'M GLAD YOU'RE HOME

MY BROTHER AND I USED TO STAND UPON THIS BALCONY AND WATCH YOU, AIKO
YOU WOULD PRACTICE *ENDLESSLY* IN THIS ROOM
I THOUGHT IT LIKELY I WOULD FIND YOU HERE
I SPENT MORE TIME IN THE DOJO THAN IN ANY OTHER ROOM OF THE HOUSE
INDEED
YOUR PURSUITS WERE FAR DIFFERENT FROM THOSE OF *MOST* CHILDREN
WHEN I WAS TAKEN IN BY THE TSUGAWA CLAN AFTER MY PARENTS DIED, I FOUND *PURPOSE* IN THIS ROOM
I DON'T KNOW WHAT I WOULD HAVE DONE HAD YOU AND TODOSI NOT AGREED TO TRAIN ME

YOU WERE A GOOD STUDENT, AIKO
YOUR DETERMINATION WHEN YOU WERE BUT A CHILD HAS SERVED YOU WELL
YOU ARE *SAMURAI*, EQUAL TO ANY MAN WHO BEARS THE TITLE AND SUPERIOR TO MANY
I AM ONLY WHAT MY TEACHERS MADE OF ME
TODOSI WAS FAR MORE OF A TEACHER THAN I
THE WAY OF THE WARRIOR CAME NATURALLY TO HIM
I HAVE OFTEN THOUGHT THAT IS WHY I CHOSE TO *TURN* FROM IT AND EMBRACE RELIGION
TODOSI TAUGHT ME *MUCH*
YES, WELL
TODOSI WAS MY BETTER IN *MANY* THINGS

OBO-SAN HOW IS YOUR MOTHER?
IT IS, UNFORTUNATELY, AS SHITOMI-SAN HAS SAID SHE IS NOT WELL
HER MIND FAILS AS WELL AS HER BODY
SHE BELIEVES TODOSI HAS VISITED HER
I WONDER IF I WILL SEE IT AGAIN
IT IS GOOD TO BE HERE AGAIN, DESPITE SUCH SADNESS I DID NOT REALIZE HOW MUCH I HAVE MISSED THIS HOUSE
I CANNOT HELP BUT WONDER WHEN I WILL SEE IT AGAIN
YOUR CONCERN MEANS A GREAT DEAL TO ME, AIKO
SHE SLEEPS NOW, BUT WHEN SHE AWAKENS I'M SURE SHE WOULD WISH TO SEE YOU
I WOULD LIKE THAT VERY MUCH
THAT IS
STRANGE INDEED
I AM SORRY SHE SUFFERS OBO-SAN
YOUR MOTHER PRACTICALLY RAISED ME WHEN I CAME HERE

MY ARMOR
ONCE I HAD THOUGHT I WOULD NEVER AGAIN HAVE USE FOR IT
NOW I WILL HAVE USE FOR IT ALL TOO SOON
THIS IS A DIFFICULT THING WE UNDERTAKE, AIKO THIS REBELLION
WERE T NOT DIFFICULT OTHERS WOULD HAVE ALREADY SUCCEEDED IN TOPPLING MITSUMUNE
BUT IT MUST BE DONE IF NAYADO IS TO BE PRESERVED
WHEN TODOSI AND I CALLED THIS HOUSE OUR HOME, MITSUMUNE AND RYUICHI WERE AS BROTHERS TO US
AND NOW THOSE BONDS ARE SHATTERED MITSUMUNE MAD AND HAVING PLACED A DEATH SENTENCE UPON ME
RYUICHI BOUND TO CARRY OUT THE SENTENCE
AND TODOSI DEAD
TODOS
I WOULD LIKE TO SHOW YOU SOMETHING

WHERE ARE WE GOING OBO SAN?
A PLACE NOT FAR FROM THE ESTATE
A PLACE VERY FEW EVEN KNOW EXISTS
HERE

TODOS! AND I DISCOVERED THIS CAVERN WHEN WE WERE BOYS
THIS WAS OUR RETREAT
OUR SECRET
I NEVER KNEW THIS WAS HERE
IT WAS NOT FOR GIRLS
BE CAREFUL THE WAY CAN BE TREACHEROUS
GIVE ME YOUR HAND
HOW MUCH FARTHER?
JUST AHEAD

IT HAS BEEN YEARS SINCE I WAS HERE
THIS IS WHERE WE PLAYED AS BOYS, PRETENDING WE WERE GREAT HEROES
AND WHEN WE WERE OLDER, WE WOULD COME HERE TO PRACTICE OUR ARMS
BUT MORE THAN ANYTHING, I THINK WE CAME HERE BECAUSE THIS WAS SOMETHING ONLY *WE* SHARED
I NEVER FELT *CLOSER* TO TODOSI THAN WHEN WE WERE JUST THE TWO OF US
I *IDOLIZED* HIM
MOST YOUNGER BROTHERS FEEL THAT WAY I SUPPOSE
I MISS HIM TERRIBLY
THE TRAGEDY OF HIS LOSS STRUCK *ALL* OF US

THE EDGE CAN BE SLIPPERY
I TRUTHFULLY DO NOT KNOW *HOW* DEEP IT IS HERE, BUT THE FALL WOULD MOST CERTAINLY PROVE FATAL
THIS MUST HAVE BEEN A SPECIAL PLACE FOR YOU AND TODOSI
I CANNOT BE HERE AND NOT THINK OF HIM
IT IS AS IF HIS GHOST HAUNTS THIS CAVERN
OBO-SAN
WHAT TODOSI AND I SHARED WAS KNOWN TO VERY FEW. YOU ARE AMONG THEM
YOU UNDERSTAND YOUR BROTHER WAS VERY DEAR TO ME
BUT HE IS *GONE* NOW
IT IS NO GOOD FOR *EITHER* OF US TO BE HAUNTED BY HIM
IT IS TIME WE BOTH MOVED ON

WHAT'S THAT?
A SASH
LEFT FROM WHEN YOU AND TODOSI WOULD COME HERE?
NO, IT SEEMS TOO NEW FOR THAT
CURIOUS
WE SHOULD GO, AIKO
IT GROWS LATE AND IT WOULD BE BEST TO RETURN TO THE ESTATE BEFORE THE STORM WORSENS
AFTER A DAY SUCH AS THIS
WE ARE BOTH IN NEED OF SLEEP

HNNF?
AHH!

TODOS!!
BROTHERS

NOTHING
A WAKING DREAM
MY MIND RUNS AWAY WITH ME
JUST A TRICK OF THE LIGHT
AND THE NIGHT
HHHHH

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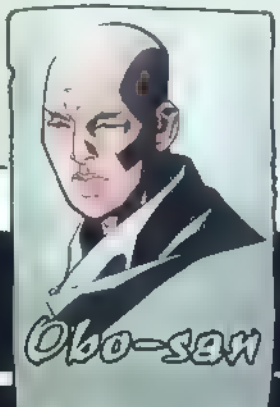
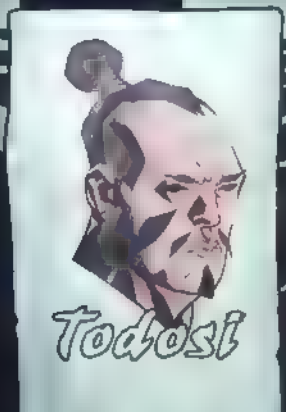
Thus Far On The Path

Emperor Mitsumune, ruler of the feudal kingdom of Nayado, has placed a death sentence upon the head of the monk Obo-san for his refusal to surrender the Weapon of Heaven.

Mitsumune, resurrected from the dead and seemingly mad, covets the power of the Weapon, an object of terrible might left behind by the gods. These are the same gods against whom Obo-san has sworn vengeance for the death of his brother, the warlord Todosi. In addition to Mitsumune, Emperor Zheng of the empire of Shinacea also seeks the Weapon.

Having retreated to a monastery with his companions Wulf and Aiko, Obo-san has decided to rebel against Mitsumune in order to preserve his homeland. Obo-san and Aiko set off for Obo-san's ancestral estate, where he was confronted by the specter of Todosi, raised from the dead to do Emperor Zheng's bidding.





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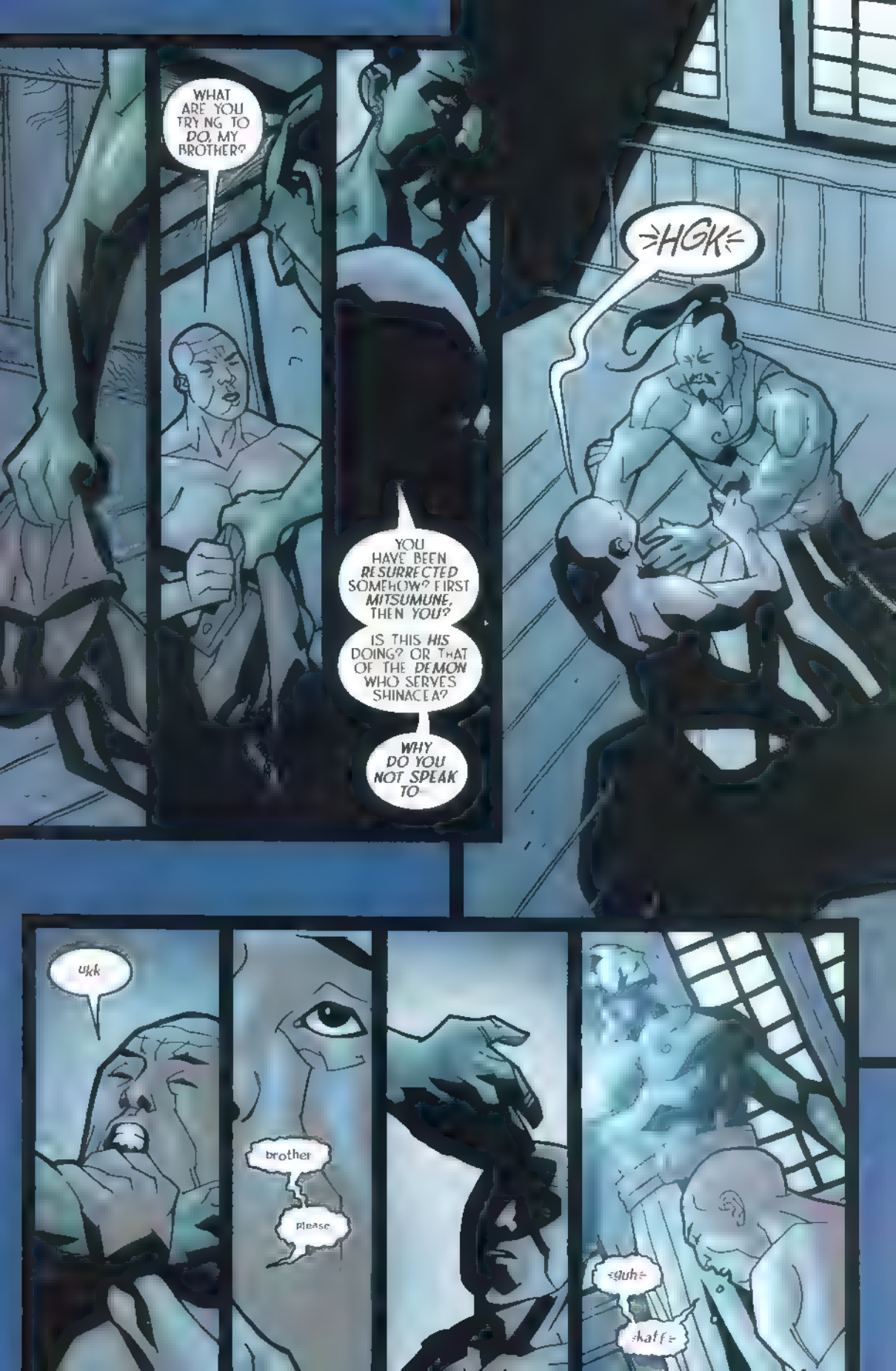
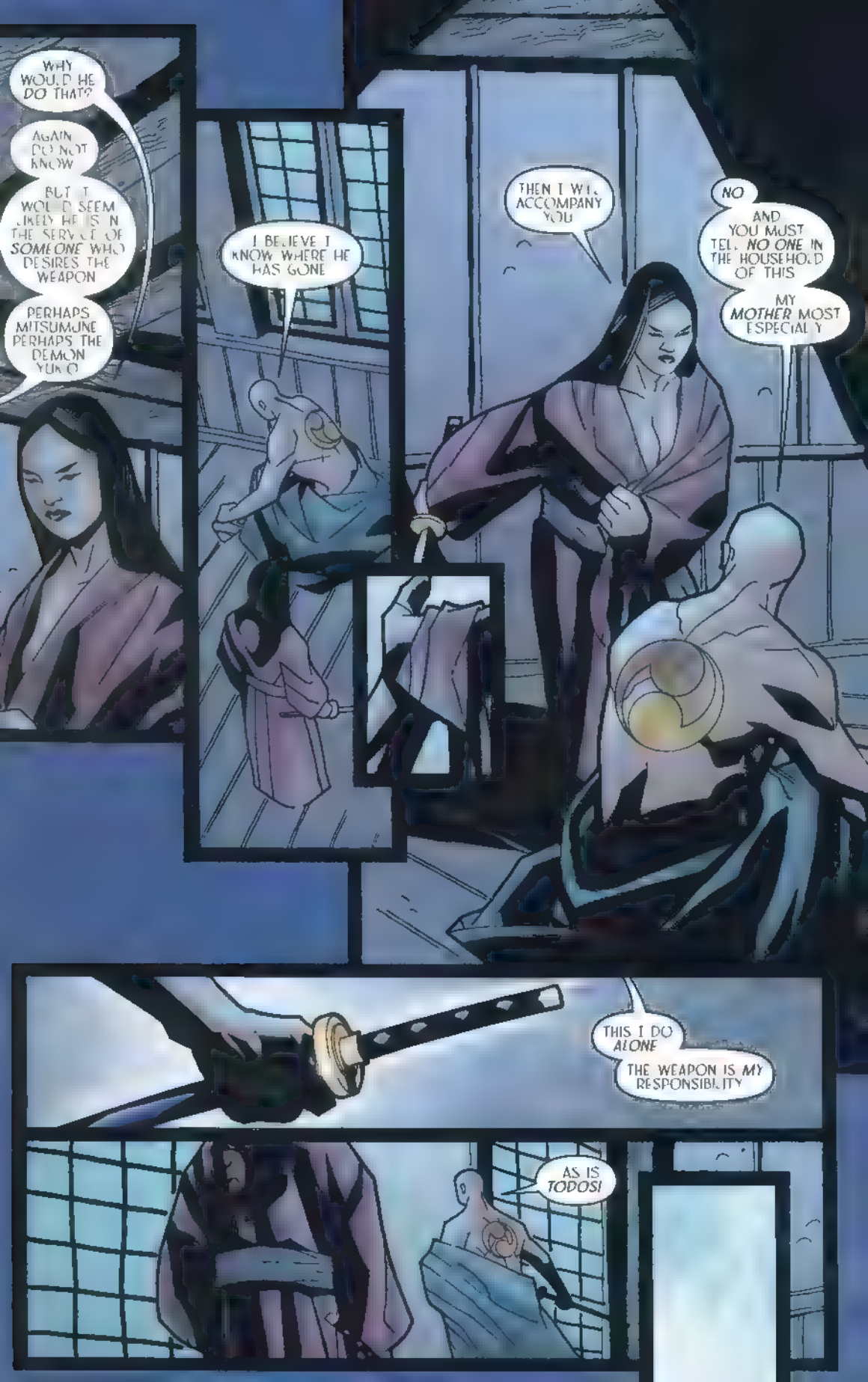
BROTHER?
IS IT TRULY YOU?
ALIVE AGAIN?

AHFF!
WHY DO YOU TREAT ME SO HARSHLY TOBOSI?
WHAT IS IT YOU *WANT* HERE?
THE WEAPON


WHAT ARE YOU TRY NG TO DO, MY BROTHER?
YOU HAVE BEEN RESURRECTED SOMEHOW? FIRST MITSUMUNE, THEN YOU?
IS THIS HIS DOING? OR THAT OF THE DEMON WHO SERVES SHINACEA?
WHY DO YOU NOT SPEAK TO—
=HGK=
ukk
brother
please
=guh=
=kaff=

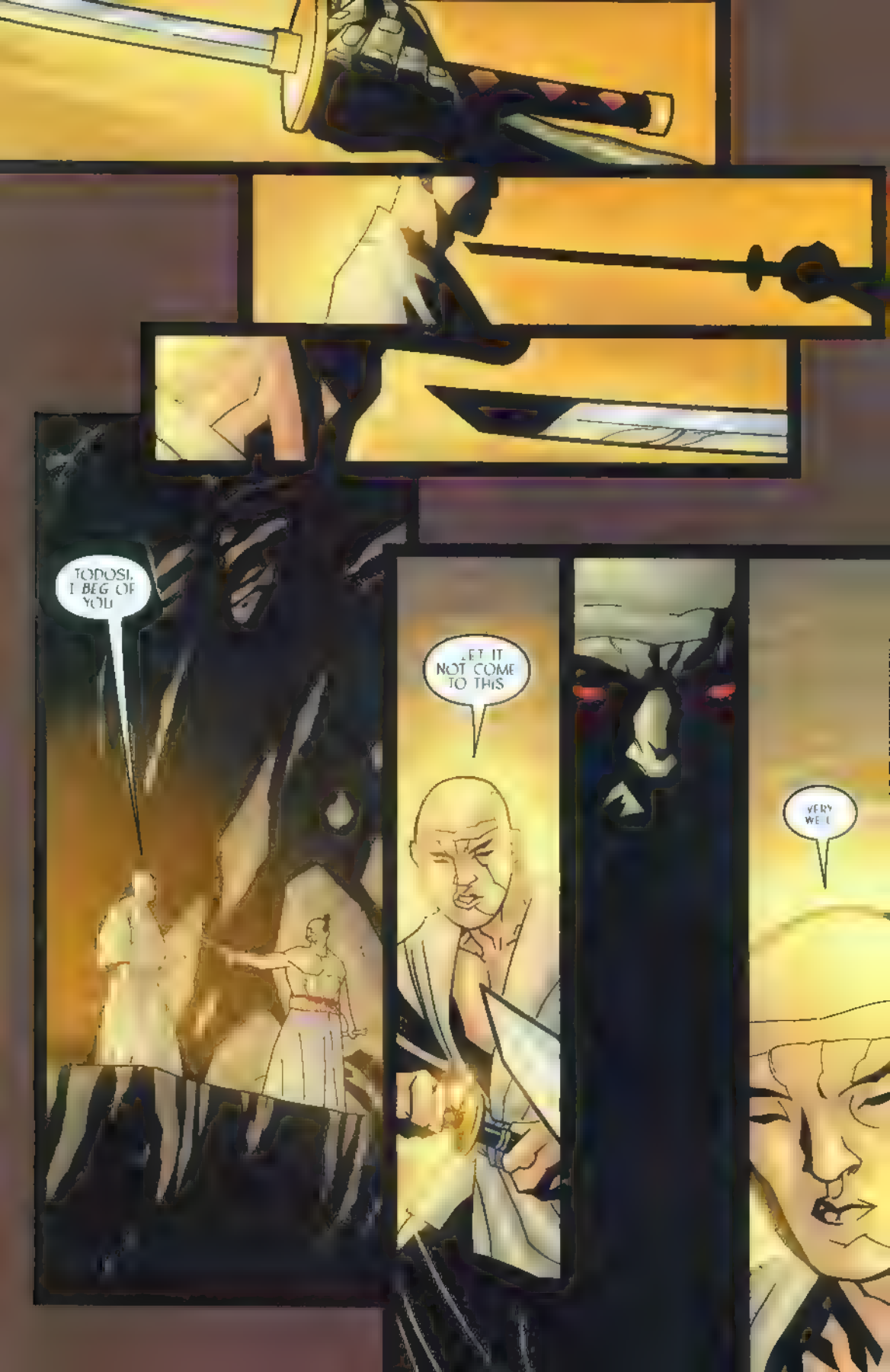
TODOSI, YOU *MUST NOT* TAKE THE WEAPON
STOP
STOP!
STOP!

OBO-SAN!
WHAT'S HAPPENED? I HEARD A STRUGGLE
TODOSI WAS HERE
WHAT?
TODOSI WAS HERE
BUT
THAT'S NOT POSSIBLE WE BOTH SAW HIM DIE
WE BOTH SAW HIS BODY BURNED AT HIS FUNERAL
BEING BACK IN THIS HOUSE YOU MUST HAVE DREAMED IT
DID I DREAM THIS?
HOW CAN SUCH A THING BE?
WAS IT A GHOST?
A VISION?
I DO NOT KNOW
HE WOULD NOT SPEAK
OR COULD NOT
HE TOOK THE WEAPON OF HEAVEN


WHY WOULD HE DO THAT?
AGAIN DO NOT KNOW
BUT IT WOULD SEEM LIKELY HE IS IN THE SERVICE OF SOMEONE WHO DESIRES THE WEAPON
PERHAPS MITSUMUNE PERHAPS THE DEMON YUKO
I BELIEVE I KNOW WHERE HE HAS GONE
THEN I WILL ACCOMPANY YOU
NO
AND YOU MUST TELL NO ONE IN THE HOUSEHOLD OF THIS
MY MOTHER MOST ESPECIALLY
THIS I DO ALONE
THE WEAPON IS MY RESPONSIBILITY
AS IS TODOSI

TODOS!?
SHOW YOURSELF BROTHER

I DO NOT UNDERSTAND
I DO NOT UNDERSTAND HOW YOU *LIVE* AGAIN EVEN THOUGH MY HEART SOARS AT IT
I DO NOT UNDERSTAND HOW YOU HAVE COME TO THIS PLACE
BUT YOU *MUST* GIVE ME THE WEAPON
THIS WAS A PLACE WE *SHARED* YOU *REMEMBERED* THAT, DIDN'T YOU?
YOU WERE DRAWN HERE THERE IS SOME *SPARK* LEFT WITHIN YOU
PLEASE, BROTHER
GIVE ME BACK THE BURDEN I MUST BEAR


TODOSI, I BEG OF YOU
LET IT NOT COME TO THIS
VERY WELL

¡ODOS!
AHH!

HNN!
YOU WERE ALWAYS THE BETTER SWORDSMAN
BUT I CANNOT ALLOW YOU TO TRIUMPH HERE

NO
THE WEAPON MUST NOT FALL

HWF!
YES, LET THIS COME TO AN END BEFORE
...NGF!

HUNNN
AH?
HGH!
BROTHER
HELP ME

WHY?
WHY WOULD YOU DECIDE TO SAVE ME?
BROTHER

WHO HAS DONE THIS TO YOU, TODOSI?
WE'LL HEAL YOU, FIND A WAY TO MAKE YOU WHAT YOU WERE, NOT THIS THING
NO
TODOSI!
BROTHER

MOTHER
I AM SO VERY PLEASED TO SEE YOU WALKING ABOUT IN THE FRESH AIR
I MUST SEE MY SON OFF ON HIS JOURNEY, MUSTN'T I?
THOUGH I DO NOT UNDERSTAND WHY YOU HAVE STAYED SUCH A SHORT TIME
I WOULD LIKE NOTHING MORE THAN TO REMAIN HERE WITH YOU
BUT THERE ARE MANY MATTERS TO WHICH I MUST ATTEND
WELL
AT LEAST YOUR *BROTHER* STILL VISITS FROM TIME TO TIME
I DO NOT THINK TODOS WILL BE VISITING ANYMORE, MOTHER
NO, I HAVE NOT SEEN HIM *LATELY*
BUT HE *MAY* BE BACK

GOODBYE, MOTHER
I LOVE YOU
BE CAREFUL, NOBUYUKI
I HOPE I WILL BE ABLE TO RETURN SOON
SHITOMI SAN
YES, LORD
I MUST ASK YOU TO CONTINUE CARING FOR MY MOTHER IN HER ILLNESS
YOU NEED NOT EVEN *ASK*
WHEN *MIGHT* YOU RETURN, LORD?
I DO NOT KNOW *IF* I WILL RETURN, SHITOMI SAN
WHEN WHAT IS TO COME *BEGINS*, THIS WILL NO LONGER BE A SAFE PLACE
I UNDERSTAND LORD

YOU ARE READY TO DEPART, AIKO?
INDEED
OBO-SAN
YOU STILL HAVE NOT TOLD ME WHAT TRANSPIRED
WHAT OF TODOSI?
TODOSI WILL TROUBLE US NO MORE

WE RIDE FOR NOGAWA LANDS?
WE DO
I DO NOT EXPECT TO BE WELCOMED WITH OPEN ARMS
AIKO, YOU NEED NOT UNDERTAKE THIS JOURNEY
THERE MUST BE *SOMEONE* AT YOUR BACK WHEN YOU CONFRONT YOUR ENEMIES
I AM NOT ABOUT TO ABANDON YOU NOW OBO SAN
THAT IS GOOD
I WONDER WHAT SUCCESS WULF AND YAMA ARE HAVING

THIS ISN'T WORKING OUT QUITE AS WELL AS I'D HOPED

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Mitsumune, resurrected from the dead and seemingly mad, covets the power of the Weapon, an object of terrible might left behind by the gods. These are the same gods against whom Obo-san has sworn vengeance for the death of his brother, the warlord Todosi.

Retreating to a monastery with his companions Wulf and Aiko, Obo-san decided to rebel against Mitsumune in order to preserve his homeland. Obo-san and Aiko set off to garner support from his enemies, the Nogawa clan. Meanwhile, Wulf and the sumo simpleton Yama have traveled north to attempt the same with the tribal Boru people.

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LADY AYA?

STORYTELLER?
IS THERE NEWS?
I AM SORRY LADY AYA
BUT NO
THERE IS NO WORD OF WULF AND YAMA'S JOURNEY NORTH TO THE BORU
NOR IS THERE WORD OF OBO SAN AND LADY AKO
I SIMPLY CAME TO SEE AFTER YOUR STATE
IT IS THE WAITING THAT IS MOST TERRIBLE
THE NOT KNOWING
HE GAVE ME THIS BRUSH
IT WAS THE FIRST GIFT I HAD EVER RECEIVED
IT IS HARD TO LOSE A WARRIOR

A WOMAN OF YOUR BEAUTY AND REFINEMENT?
I FIND MYSELF WONDERING HOW THAT CAN BE SO
MY FAMILY SOLD ME TO A BROTHEL WHEN I WAS LITTLE MORE THAN A GIRL IT IS THE ONLY LIFE I HAVE KNOWN
EVENTUALLY I WAS SOLD AGAIN AND BROUGHT TO YAZAKI TO SERVE AS A COURTESAN TO THE EMPEROR
IT WAS THERE THAT I MET WULF
WE CARRIED ON A SECRET AFFAIR EVEN THOUGH IT WAS *FORBIDDEN* IT WOULD HAVE MEANT *DEATH* FOR BOTH OF US HAD WE BEEN DISCOVERED
WULF WAS THE FIRST MAN WHO DID NOT LOOK DOWN UPON ME FOR WHAT I WAS THE FIRST MAN WHO TRULY *LOVED* ME
WHEN HE FLED THE PALACE WITH OBO-SAN AND AIKO I HAD THOUGHT NEVER TO SEE HIM AGAIN
BUT HE *RETURNED* FOR ME, AT THE RISK OF HIS OWN LIFE
WULF IS A RARE MAN
I DO NOT BELIEVE HIS STORY S YET OVER
I PRAY HE IS NOT IN DANGER
OR *WORSE*

LOOSE ME, DAMN YOU, AND I'LL GIVE YOU A FIGHT!
BRING ME MY SWORD!
FACE ME FAIRLY AND I'LL CUT DOWN EVERY ONE OF YOU!
YOU WILL MAKE THEM ANGRY BY YELLING AT THEM, WULF
THEY'RE GOING TO BURN US ALIVE, YOU GREAT FOOL!
I DON'T THINK I CAN MAKE IT ANY WORSE!
BUT WE DON'T HAVE TO BE RUDE

PROTEST AND STRUGGLE AS MUCH AS YOU WISH
YOU WILL STILL SUFFER THE FATE OF *ALL* OUTSIDERS WHO COME TO THE AND OF THE BORE
ONCE *YOU* ARE DISPATCHED
WE SHALL HAVE ONLY THE *DEMON BEAR* OF THE FOREST TO PLAGUE US
DEMON BEAR?
WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?
IT WILL AVAIL YOU NOTHING TO FEIGN IGNORANCE
YOU ARE LIKELY IN *LEAGUE* WITH THE BEAST
WAIT

I WOULD HEAR MORE OF THIS
WOLF? WHO IS THAT?
THE ONE IN CHARGE, I EXPECT
I AM URMAYA, ELDER OF THIS VILLAGE
WE DO NOT TRUST THOSE WHO ARE UNKNOWN TO US YET YOU SAY YOU ARE NOT AGENTS OF THE DEMON BEAR?
NO
AS I HAVE ALREADY TRIED TO TELL YOU WE JOURNEYED HERE ONLY TO WIN THE SUPPORT OF THE BORU IN THE WAR THAT IS TO COME
WE SERVE NO DEMON
WE WISH ONLY TO BE LEFT IN PEACE
BUT WE WHO FIRST CALLED THIS LAND HOME ARE PUSHED EVER NORTHWARD BY THOSE WHO NOW RULE THESE LANDS
WORSE, THIS PLACE IS HAUNTED BY A DEMON IN THE FORM OF A MIGHTY BEAR WHO SLAUGHTERS OUR PEOPLE IF THEY STRAY TOO DEEP INTO THE FORESTS
WE ARE HUNTED, AS IF TO PUNISH US FOR SOME TRANSGRESSION
TRULY WE KNOW NOTHING OF THIS DEMON BEAR
BUT IF YOU FREE ME, I WILL GO INTO THE FOREST AND SLAY THIS CREATURE
IF I PERISH, YOU ARE RID OF ME ANYWAY
BUT IF I SURVIVE AND FREE YOU OF THIS TERROR YOU AND YOUR PEOPLE JOIN OUR REBELLION
I GUARANTEE YOU YOUR LANDS IF WE ARE VICTORIOUS
VERY WELL
WHAT SAY YOU?

FREE THAT ONE
WHAT?
I BELIEVE YOU MIGHT RUN AWAY IF WE FREED YOU
HE WILL NOT
I SHOULD BE THE ONE TO GO I AM THE WARRIOR NOT HE
NO, IT MUST BE THIS ONE
WHY DO YOU DO THIS THING?
IF YOU WANT ME TO
HE IS A HALFWIT!
YOU CANNOT SEND HIM TO DO THIS TASK!
I OFFERED MYSELF, NOT HIM!
YAMA YOU MUST BE THE EQUAL OF THIS TASK OTHERWISE
IT IS LIKELY THE DEATH OF BOTH OF US
IT WILL BE FINE, WOLF
YOU SEE
THOUGH I AM AFRAID OF THE DARK

I DON'T LIKE THE DARK IT'S VERY
DARK
THEY SAY THERE IS NOTHING IN THE DARK THAT'S NOT THERE DURING THE LIGHT
BUT THAT'S NOT ALWAYS TRUE

HELLO?
IS SOMEONE THERE?
IT'S NOT GOOD TO BE IN THE DARK ALONE IF SOMEONE IS THERE
WHY DON'T YOU COME OUT SO WE CAN BE ALONE TOGETHER?
COME OUT AND WE CAN BE FRIENDS
AHH

HRRRRR

HRAAA!
I DON'T WISH TO HURT YOU
HRF!
AND I DON'T WISH YOU TO HURT ME

THE PEOPLE DO NOT WANT YOU HERE
SO IT WOULD BE BEST IF YOU WENT SOMEWHERE ELSE
HRMM
PLEASE, I DO NOT WANT TO FIGHT
UFF!
AAH!

I AM SORRY YOU MAKE ME DO THIS
NH!
ONCE I WAS SUMO
WHEN I WAS A BOY THEY TOOK ME TO A PLACE AND TRAINED ME TO BECOME VERY BIG
AND VERY STRONG
AND VERY FAST

YOU
YOU ARE NO DEMON
NO BEAR
ONLY A MAN
AAAAAA!

UGFF!
YOU MUST *STOP* NOW

URRGH!
HRRRM
HELLO?
ARE YOU BADLY INJURED?
IT WAS NEVER MY INTENTION TO HURT YOU
RH?
AND I WILL NOT HURT YOU NOW

CAN YOU SPEAK?
MY NAME IS YAMA WHAT'S YOUR NAME?
I AM NO ONE
NOT ANYMORE
Ah A RIDDLE I LIKE RIDDLES
WHO WERE YOU THEN?
I WAS
I WAS A MAN A GENERAL
GENERAL HEE HYUNG SEO
I LED THE ARMY OF KODANG WHEN IT INVADED NAYADO
WE WERE DEFEATED
WIPED OUT
THOSE FEW WHO LIVED FLED, AND JOURNEYED SOUTH ACROSS THE SEA BACK TO KODANG
BUT I COULD NOT RETURN WITH SUCH SHAME
SO THE GODS
THEY TURNED ME INTO A BEAR AS PUNISHMENT FOR MY SHAME
NOW I LIVE AS ANY ANIMAL WOULD
FORAGING TO SURVIVE
DO YOU HAVE NO HOME TO GO TO?
THE FOREST IS MY HOME
WHERE ELSE WOULD A BEAR LIVE?

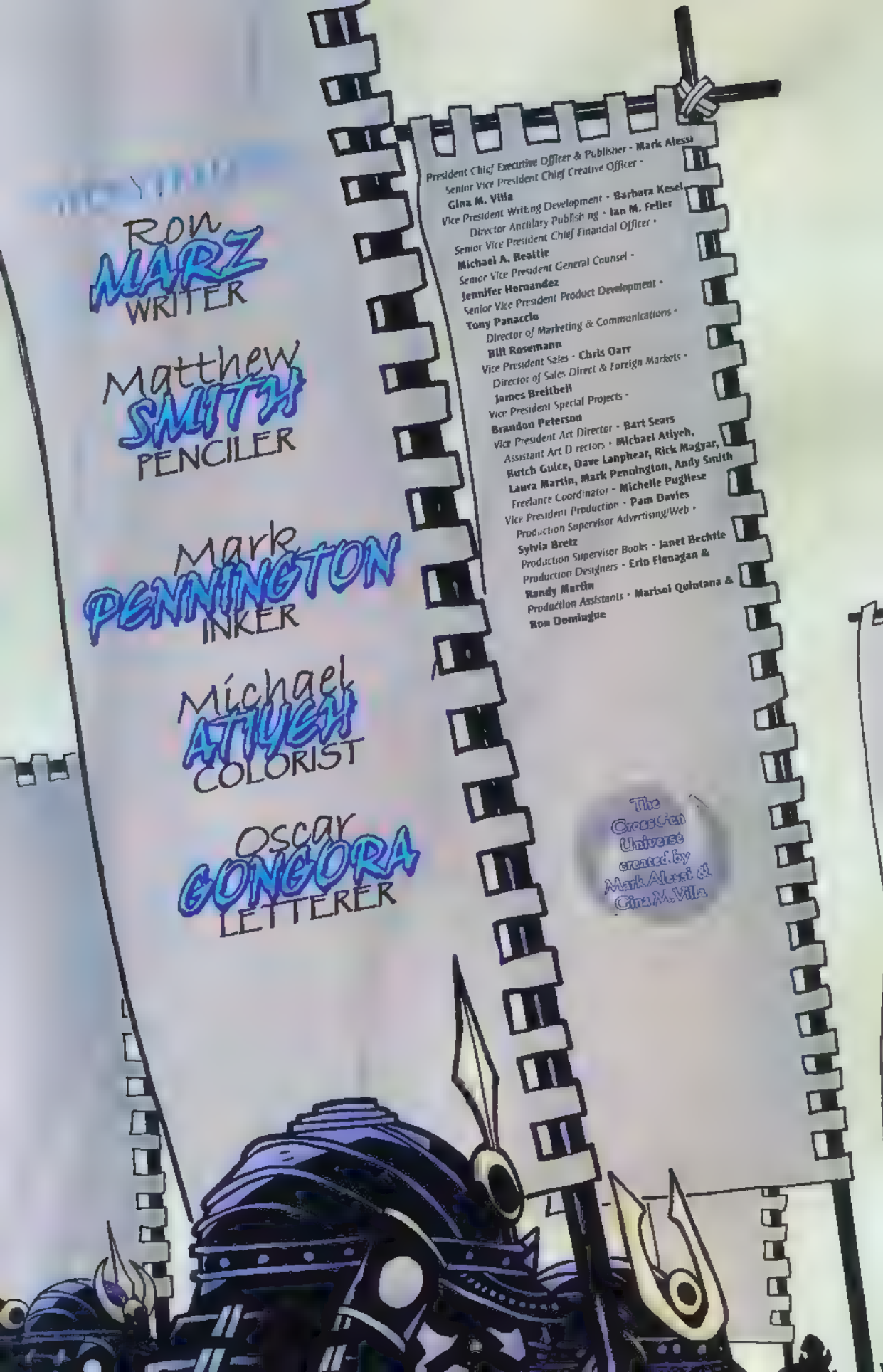
YOU HAVE BEEN *CRUEL* TO THE PEOPLE WHO LIVE HERE
YOU HAVE *HURT* THEM AND SO THEY *HATE* YOU
WHY WOULD YOU BEHAVE SO?
I MUST *EAT!*
I MUST *SURVIVE!*
BUT IT IS NOT GOOD TO HURT OTHERS WHILE YOU ARE DOING SO
THEY WILL NOT LEAVE ME WITH MY SHAME!
ALWAYS THEY COME INTO THE FOREST!
THEY FELL THE TREES AND TAKE THE GAME THAT SHOULD BE MINE!
I HAVE AN IDEA
BUT YOU MUST *TRUST* ME

"YOUR COMPANION HAS BEEN A GREAT WHILE."
AND I DO NOT BELIEVE HE WOULD *FLEE* AND LEAVE YOU TO YOUR FATE
I'M AFRAID THE DEMON WAS TOO FEARSOME FOR HIM TO OVERCOME
MY FRIEND MAY WELL BE OF LITTLE BRAIN
BUT HIS LOYALTY IS MATCHED ONLY BY HIS *STRENGTH*
HE WILL RETURN
WHO WILL RETURN?

YAMA!
ARE YOU WELL?
I AM VERY FINE, THANK YOU
AND THE DEMON BEAR?
DID YOU *SLAY* IT?
WE FOUGHT A *MIGHTY* BATTLE INDEED. BACK AND FORTH WE STRUGGLED
. BUT *HE* COULD NOT DEFEAT ME AND *I* COULD NOT BEST HIM
SO WE AGREED TO A BARGAIN
IF THE BORU WILL BUILD A *SHRINE* IN THE FOREST AND MAKE OFFERINGS OF FOOD *EACH DAY*, THE DEMON BEAR PROMISES TO TROUBLE YOU NO MORE
HE ASKS THAT THE DEEP FOREST BE *HIS*, AND THAT YOU DO NOT TRESPASS THERE
HE WISHES ONLY TO BE *LEFT ALONE*
IS THIS ACCEPTABLE TO YOU?
IT IS NOT IN YOU TO BE *DECEITFUL* I BELIEVE YOUR TALE
IT WILL BE DONE
OUR AGREEMENT HINGED UPON THE *DEATH* OF THE DEMON BEAR NOT A *TRUCE*
BUT YOUR COMPANION *DID* RESOLVE THE CONFLICT
YOU SHALL BE FREED

WHAT OF THE REST?
WILL YOU JOIN THE REBELLION AGAINST MITSUMUNE?
WE BORU ABIDE BY THE *INTENT* OF OUR BARGAINS
YOU HAVE FREED US FROM A TERROR THAT HAS LONG ASSAILED US
THERE IS NO LOVE FOR THE EMPEROR AMONG MY PEOPLE WHEN YOU HAVE NEED OF US
OUR SWORDS WILL BE YOURS
THEN WE ARE INDEBTED TO YOU
WHEN THE TIME COMES WE WILL SUMMON YOU
YAMA
IT WOULD APPEAR YOU HAVE SAVED MY LIFE
IT WOULD APPEAR SO
THEN I OWE YOU MY *THANKS* AS WELL AS MY LIFE
I AM PROUD TO CALL YOU *FRIEND*

COME ALONG
WE'VE QUITE A JOURNEY AHEAD OF US
WE'RE BOUND FOR *HOME* NOW?
WE RETURN TO THE MONASTERY, YES, TO AWAIT OBO SAN
I BELIEVE WE WOULD MAKE BETTER TIME IF WE HAD OUR *HORSES*
THE THOUGHT OCCURS TO *ME* AS WELL
A SHAME, THEN, THAT YOU SET THEM TO GRAZE WITHOUT TYING THEM
DO YOU THINK THAT WOULD HAVE MADE THEM LESS LIKELY TO *RUN AWAY?*
THEY DIDN'T *SEEM* LIKE THE TYPE TO RUN AWAY
I FEAR THIS IS GOING TO BE A *LONG* WALK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Thus Far On

The Path

Emperor Mitsumune, ruler of the feudal kingdom of Nayado, has placed a death sentence upon the head of the monk Obo-san for his refusal to surrender the Weapon of Heaven.

Mitsumune, resurrected from the dead and seemingly mad, covets the power of the Weapon, an object of terrible might left behind by the gods. These are the same gods against whom Obo san has sworn vengeance for the death of his brother, the warlord Todosi.

Retreating to a monastery with his companions Wulf and Aiko, Obo-san decided to rebel against Mitsumune in order to preserve his homeland. Wulf and the sumo simpleton Yama successfully recruited the tribal Boru people to the rebellion, while Obo-san and Aiko seek to garner support from his enemies, the Nogawa clan.

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A RIDER APPROACHES

THERE ON THE ROAD

NO ONE IS EXPECTED
HE IS NOT FAMILIAR
SHALL I KILL HIM?
ANYONE FOOL ENOUGH TO RIDE SO BOLDLY TO THE NOGAWA FORTRESS DESERVES DEATH
INDEED
HIGH!
WHERE DOES THAT ATTACK COME FROM?
I SEE NO ONE!

I COME TO YOU IN *PEACE*
I WOULD SPEAK TO THE *LORD* OF THE NOGAWAS

WHO ARE YOU THAT YOU COME HERE BEARING THE CREST OF THE TSUGAWA CLAN UPON YOUR ARMOR?
MY BUSINESS IS WITH THE CLAN LEADER OF THE NOGAWAS NOT AN UNDERLING
YOU ARE IN NO POSITION TO DICTATE TERMS
REMOVE YOUR MASK!
MY BUSINESS IS WITH THE CLAN LEADER
REMOVE YOUR MASK OR I SHALL REMOVE YOUR HEAD, INSOLENT TSUGAWA DOG!
STAND DOWN

I WOULD HEAR WHAT THIS BRAVE
OR FOOL HARDY
WARRIOR HAS TO SAY
LORD SHIGETADA SAN I AM HONORED THAT YOU WOULD DEIGN TO RECEIVE ME
I WOULD KNOW WHO I AM RECEIVING

I AM TSUGAWA NOBUYUKI
ALSO CALLED OBO-SAN
YOU ARE BOLD TO COME TO THIS PLACE HOW DO YOU KNOW WE WILL NOT SLAY YOU?
BECAUSE I KNOW THE LORD OF THE NOGAWAS IS MY ENEMY...
BUT HE IS NOT A FOOL
Ah
YOU WELL KNOW WHICH WORDS WILL PIQUE MY INTEREST AND SPARE YOUR LIFE
PERHAPS
WHAT IS IT YOU WANT, TSUGAWA NOBUYUKI?
I WISH TO ENLIST THE MIGHT OF THE NOGAWA CLAN
HE WHO SITS UPON THE THRONE OF PETALS IS MAD MITSUMUNE WILL LEAD ALL NAYADO TO RUIN IF HE IS NOT STOPPED
THERE MUST BE REBELLION
I WILL LEAD IT BUT I NEED YOUR SUPPORT IF THERE IS TO BE ANY HOPE OF VICTORY AGAINST THE IMPERIAL FORCES

I PROPOSE AN *ALLIANCE* WE WILL GATHER *OTHERS* TO OUR BANNER
BUT *YOUR* SAMURAI WILL BE THE HEART OF OUR ARMY
IS THERE NOT A WISER COURSE THAN *JOINING* YOU?
I COULD *TAKE YOU* AND TURN YOU OVER TO THE EMPEROR AND BE *REWARDED* FOR MY LOYALTY
YOUR HEAD HAS MORE VALUE IN A *BOX* THAN ON YOUR SHOULDERS
INDEED, YOU COULD DO SUCH A THING TO CURRY FAVOR WITH THE EMPEROR
BUT THEN THE NOGAWAS STILL WOULD BE MERELY *LACKEYS* FOR MITSUMUNE AND THE OHIRA CLAN AS LONG AS THE THRONE IS THEIRS
FOLLOW *ME*...
...AND YOU WOULD BE THE *RIGHT HAND* TO THE THRONE
IF WE WERE TO BE VICTORIOUS
IF
PERHAPS RYUICHI'S ARMY *COULD* BE BROKEN BUT THERE ARE TALES OF THE EMPEROR HIMSELF
HIS RESURRECTION HIS *POWER*
HOW WOULD SUCH A FOE BE *DEFEATED?*
I SHALL FACE THE EMPEROR

WITH *THIS*
IT IS THE *WEAPON OF HEAVEN,* TAKEN FROM THE GODS THEMSELVES
THIS SHALL BE THE INSTRUMENT OF MITSUMUNE'S DESTRUCTION
THAT?

MOST IMPRESSIVE
BUT IF THE WEAPON IS OF SUCH AWESOME MIGHT, WHY DO YOU NEED US?
I ASSUME THE TALES OF YOUR ANNIHILATION OF THE SHINAGEAN INVADERS ARE TRUE?
THEY ARE
THEN COULD YOU NOT DESTROY MITSUMUNE AND THE IMPERIAL ARMY WITH THE WEAPON?
THE WEAPON IS AN UNCLEAN THING OF FALSE GODS
I WILL NOT USE IT AGAINST SONS OF NAYADO
SO YOU ARE A HERETIC AND A REBEL. BUT YOU ARE PRINCIPLED
YOU SPEAK MORE LIKE A MONK THAN A WARRIOR
I ASSURE YOU, I AM NO LONGER A MAN OF FAITH
IN ORDER TO SAVE NAYADO FROM ITSELF I HAVE BECOME A MAN OF WAR
PROVE IT
WHAT?
PROVE IT
IF I AM TO FOLLOW YOU I MUST KNOW YOU ARE A WARRIOR DESERVING OF MY SUPPORT
FIGHT ONE OF MY MEN
IF YOU TRIUMPH, THE NOGAWA CLAN WILL SERVE YOUR CAUSE IF YOU DO NOT
YOU WERE NEVER WORTHY OF US

SUCH A DISPLAY IS UNNECESSARY
THE DECISION SHOULD NOT HINGE UPON ME *DEFEATING* ONE OF YOUR WARRIORS
I DO NOT EXPECT YOU TO *DEFEAT* ONE OF MY WARRIORS
I EXPECT YOU TO *KILL* HIM
THAT WOULD BE A *SENSELESS* WASTE OF LIFE
TRULY YOU *MUST* BE A MONK IF YOU SHRINK AT THE THOUGHT OF GLORIOUS COMBAT AND HONORABLE DEATH
DECIDE
FIGHT *ONE* OF MY MEN
OR FIGHT *ALL* OF THEM

LET IT BE DONE
ALLOW *ME* THIS TASK, LORD
I WOULD HAVE THE *HONOR* OF PROVING NOGAWA SUPERIORITY AND SPILLING TSUGAWA BLOOD ON THE SANDS
OF COURSE GAKYO-SAN
WHO *ELSE*, BUT MY PERSONAL BODYGUARD?
VERY WELL THEN
TO THE DEATH

AHHN!
HHH

HRGH!
ENOUGH.

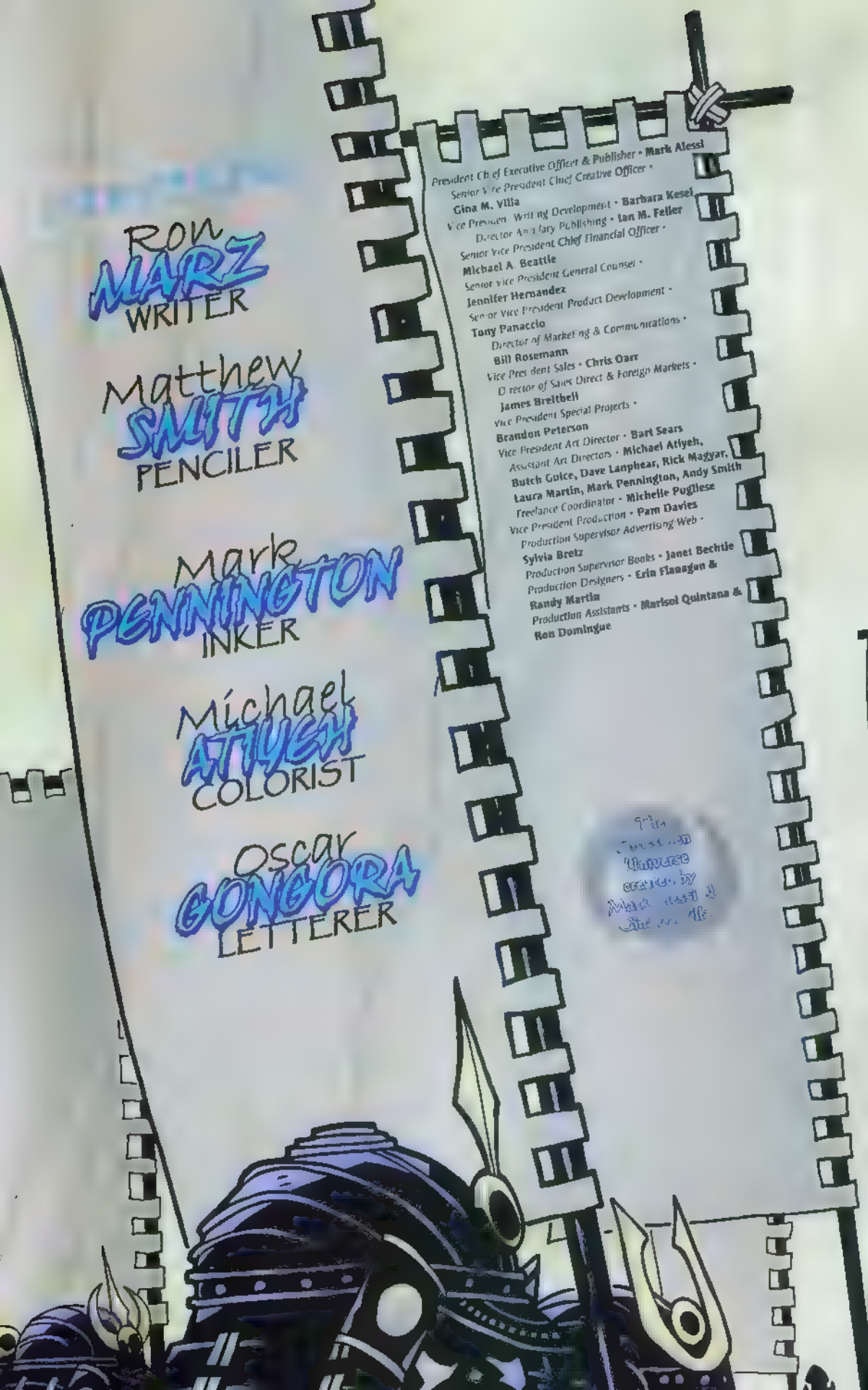
NO
TO THE DEATH
ARE YOU SATISFIED?

Oh YES, QUITE SATISFIED
YOU PROVE YOURSELF FAR MORE A WARRIOR THAN A MONK
PLEASE, STAY AND AVAIL YOURSELF OF NOGAWA HOSPITALITY
I HAVE HAD QUITE ENOUGH OF NOGAWA HOSPITALITY
I ONLY WISH TO KNOW IF YOU WILL ABIDE BY OUR AGREEMENT
OF COURSE
YOU WILL HAVE ALL THE MEN OF THE NOGAWA CLAN AT YOUR DISPOSAL
SAVE FOR THE ONE YOU FORCED ME TO SLAY
I EXPECT OUR ALLEGIANCE WILL PROVE MOST INTERESTING, SHIGETADA-SAN
I WILL SEND WORD WHEN YOU AND YOUR WARRIORS ARE NEEDED
I SHALL AWAIT IT

OBO SAN
I AM *RELIEVED* AT THE SIGHT OF YOU
I WAS UNSURE IF I'D SET EYES UPON YOU *EVER AGAIN* ONCE YOU PASSED THROUGH THOSE GATES
IT WAS NOT A *PLEASANT* DUTY, BUT IT WAS A *SUCCESSFUL* ONE
THE NOGAWAS WILL ALLY WITH US IN THE REBELLION
I OWE YOU MY THANKS FOR LOOKING AFTER MY *SAFETY* ON MY APPROACH

YOU'RE WOUNDED
COME DOWN FROM THERE AND LET ME TEND TO IT
LATER WHEN WE ARE AWAY FROM HERE
AIKO
I AM GLAD YOU WAITED FOR ME
AS AM I
THE THOUGHT OF GOING ON WITHOUT YOU IS UNBEARABLE TO ME
COME
WE NEED TO RETURN TO TAMAHASH AND MAKE PREPARATIONS
SOON THERE WILL BE WAR

I AM *SURPRISED*, SHIGETADA SAN
AN ALLIANCE WITH OUR HATED ENEMIES THE TSUGAWAS *AND* A REBELLION AGAINST THE THRONE?
IT SERVES *US* AND OUR *AMBITIONS*
FOR NOW
BUT WHEN THE TIME COMES WE WILL *BETRAY* THE TSUGAWAS
AND TAKE THE WEAPON OF HEAVEN *AND* THE THRONE FOR *OURSELVES*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Thus Far On

The Path

Emperor Mitsumune, ruler of the feudal kingdom of Nayado, has placed a death sentence upon the head of the monk Obo-san for his refusal to surrender the Weapon of Heaven.

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Retreating to a monastery with his companions Wulf and Aiko, Obo-san decided to rebel against Mitsumune in order to preserve his homeland. The tribal Boru people, as well as Obo-san's traditional enemies, the Nogawa clan, were recruited to support the rebellion. Meanwhile, Mitsumune rebuilds his army.

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"YOU SEE? THE GOD HAS BEEN ANGERED."

BECAUSE THE WARRIOR HAD THE *INSOLENCE* TO CHALLENGE HIM

THE WARRIOR COWERS HE IS *FEARFUL*, AS HE SHOULD BE

IS THIS NOT A WONDERFUL ENTERTAINMENT RYUICHI?

INDEED, MY EMPEROR IT IS
MOST FITTING
I'M PLEASED YOU FIND IT APPROPRIATE
I COMMISSIONED THE WORK AS AN *INSTRUCTIVE* TALE

THE GOD *SMITES* THE WARRIOR
A FATE HE SO *RICHLY* DESERVES
YET EVEN A *GOD* CAN BE OVERCOME BY THE *SECRET POWER* HIDDEN IN THE WARRIOR'S SOUL
"HE FALLS BACK BEFORE IT, AND THE MIGHTY WEAPON OF THE GODS SLIPS FROM HIS GRASP"

EMPEROR IF I MAY, I REMIND YOU THE TROOPS HAVE BEEN ASSEMBLED AS YOU COMMANDED, AND AWAIT YOUR REVIEW
I AM PRESENTLY ENJOYING THE KABUKI
CERTAINLY, MY EMPEROR, BUT THE TROOPS HAVE BEEN WAITING SOME TIME AND -
AND THEY WILL CONTINUE TO WAIT, WILL THEY NOT?
OF COURSE, MY EMPEROR
YOU MUST LEARN TO RELAX, RYUICHI
DRINK IN THE SPECTACLE LOOK
THE WARRIOR LIES DEAD, BUT THE PRIEST NOW ENTERS THE BATTLEFIELD
" AND TAKES UP THE WEAPON OF THE GODS THE GODS FALL BACK IN FEAR OF THE WEAPON'S POWER "

" ALL SAVE ONE
"ONE HAS THE COURAGE TO BATTLE THE PRIEST FOR THE WEAPON..
" AND WREST IT FROM HIS UNWORTHY HANDS.
"THE PRIEST COLLAPSES BEFORE THE GOD "
AND DIES A MOST PAINFUL DEATH, UNDERSTANDING HE HAS SUFFERED JUST PUNISHMENT FOR THE ARROGANCE OF CHALLENGING HIS GODS
WITH HIS DYING BREATH HE CRIES OUT FOR FORGIVENESS...
BUT FINDS NONE
FORGIVE ME, MY EMPEROR

I WAS DELAYED
YUKIO.
THE PERFORMANCE HAS ALREADY *BEGUN*
MY APOLOGIES, LORD BUT NOW I AM HERE TO SERVE YOUR NEEDS.
ALL YOUR NEEDS
I'M SURE THAT YOU ARE
AS LONG AS MY NEEDS DO NOT CONFLICT WITH THOSE OF YOUR *OTHER* MASTER
MY OTHER MASTER?
IF MY EMPEROR MAKES A JEST, I AM AFRAID IT IS *LOST* UPON ME
I SERVE NO ONE BUT *YOU*

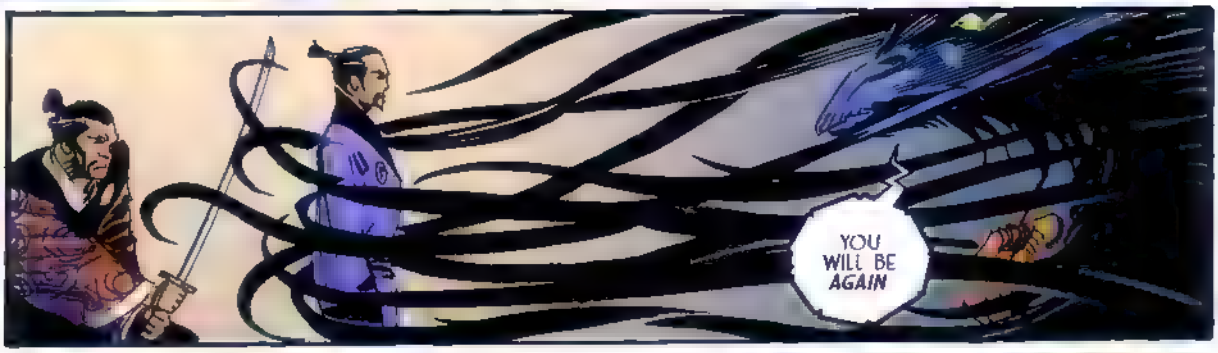
YOU MUST BELIEVE ME A FOOL IF YOU THOUGHT I WAS OBLIVIOUS TO YOUR TREACHERY
YOU MUST BELIEVE ME AN EVEN GREATER FOOL IF YOU CLING TO THE RUSE EVEN NOW
WHAT ARE YOU DOING?
I DID NOT GIVE YOU LEAVE TO CEASE THE PERFORMANCE
CONTINUE!
YES, LORD!
AT ONCE!
DEAR YUKIO
I'M WELL AWARE YOU SPIED FOR THAT FAT FOOL ZHENG OF SHINACEA THAT YOU REPORTED TO HIM
I TOLERATED IT BECAUSE I WAS AMUSED BY THE GAME
BUT NO MORE
YOU ARE NO LONGER USEFUL TO ME

AND YOU NO LONGER AMUSE ME
ALL SO TRUE
A BARGAIN TIES ME TO THE LOATHSOME ZHENG, BUT IT PLEASES ME THIS PRETENSE IS AT AN END
I MUCH PREFER SPILLING YOUR BOWELS TO LAYING WITH YOU TO LEARN YOUR SECRETS
WHAT IS SHE?
STAND ASIDE, MY EMPEROR!
LET ME STRIKE DOWN THE TRAITOR!

NO, RYUICHI
BUT MY EMPEROR, YOU ARE—
I SHALL ENJOY DOING IT MYSELF
I KNOW WHAT YOU ARE
IF THAT IS SO
THEN YOU KNOW I AM FAR MORE POWERFUL
THAN YOU COULD EVER HOPE TO STAND AGAINST

I AM YOUR
DEATH,
LITTLE MAN

SHE IS NOT HUMAN!
WE ARE OLDER THAN THE BONES OF THIS WORLD
ONCE YOUR KIND WERE OUR PREY


YOU WILL BE AGAIN

SHE DEVOURS HIM

OH YES, I KNOW WHAT YOU ARE
AND I KNOW YOU HAVE SURVIVED MUCH BUT THIS THIS YOU WILL NOT SURVIVE
FOR YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT I AM
COME AND LEARN
EMBRACE ME
YOU
ARE NOT
HUMAN

EMPEROR?

I AM *HERE*, RYUICHI
AND I AM *WELL*
THOUGH *NEITHER* CAN BE SAID FOR MY COURTESAN
BUT
HOW IS IT YOU
I RETURNED FROM THE *DEAD*, RYUICHI
DID YOU THINK I COULD NOT DISPOSE OF A *SPY* IN MY PALACE?

OF COURSE, EMPEROR
OF COURSE

APPARENTLY THE EVENING'S PERFORMANCE IS AT AN *END*

YOU HAD WANTED TO SHOW ME MY *ARMY*, DID YOU NOT?
Ah
YES, EMPEROR, YOU HAD REQUESTED IT IF THAT IS STILL YOUR *WISH*?

LET US DO SO
YES, MY EMPEROR

MY SPIES HAVE RETURNED
AND THEY BRING NEWS OF OBO-SAN'S PLANS
HE HAS AGAIN RETREATED TO TAKAIHASHI MONASTERY
IN THE PAST WEEKS, HE FORGED ALLIANCES WITH THE NOGAWA CLAN, AS WELL AS THE BORU OF THE FAR NORTH
INCLUDING HIS BROTHER MONKS, HIS FORCE STILL NUMBERS LESS THAN TEN THOUSAND WARRIORS
BUT HE DOES POSSESS THE WEAPON OF HEAVEN
I WILL DEAL WITH THE WEAPON

TELL ME OF MY *ARMY*
WE *REBUILD*, BUT THE IMPERIAL FORCES WERE *DECIMATED* DURING THE INVASION BY THE SHINACEANS
IT WAS FORTUNATE NO *OTHER* ENEMY ATTEMPTED INVASION WHEN WE WERE SO VULNERABLE
STOP HERE
IT APPEARS YOUR *RECRUITMENT EFFORTS* HAVE SUCCEEDED ADMIRABLY
WHERE HAVE THEY COME FROM?
A GREAT MANY ARE CONSCRIPTED PEASANTS.
THE SAMURAI WHO LEAD THEM DRAWN FROM THE PRIVATE ARMIES OF THE DAIMYOS..
SAVE FOR THE *NOGAWAS*, OF COURSE

YOUR ARMY NOW STANDS AT *FORTY THOUSAND MEN*, WITH MORE ARRIVING EACH DAY

THEY STILL REQUIRE *TRAINING* IT WILL BE SOME TIME BEFORE THEY ARE READY FOR THE BATTLEFIELD
THAT IS *YOUR* CONCERN
ONCE TRAINED, THESE MEN WILL BE ENOUGH TO *PUT DOWN* THIS REBELLION?
YOUR ARMY WILL PROTECT *YOU* AND NAYADO ITSELF, EMPEROR
WE ARE *ALL* YOUR LOYAL SERVANTS
MOST EXCELLENT
WE WILL *CRUSH* THE REBELLION
AND THEN I WILL SEE TO *OBO-SAN'S* DESTRUCTION *MYSELF*

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Thus Far On

The Path

The monk Obo san reluctantly has decided to rebel against his friend, the Emperor Mitsumune, ruler of the feudal kingdom of Nayado. Mitsumune appears mad at the very least, having been resurrected from the dead and displaying powers far beyond mortal scope.

Obo-san is armed with the Weapon of Heaven, an object of terrible might left behind by the gods. These are the same gods against whom Obo-san has sworn eventual vengeance for the death of his brother, the warlord Todosi.

Aiding Obo-san in his efforts are his comrades Wulf and Aiko, who have helped him recruit an army for the rebellion. Meanwhile, General Ryuichi, another boyhood friend to Obo san, is duty-bound to lead the Emperor's forces.

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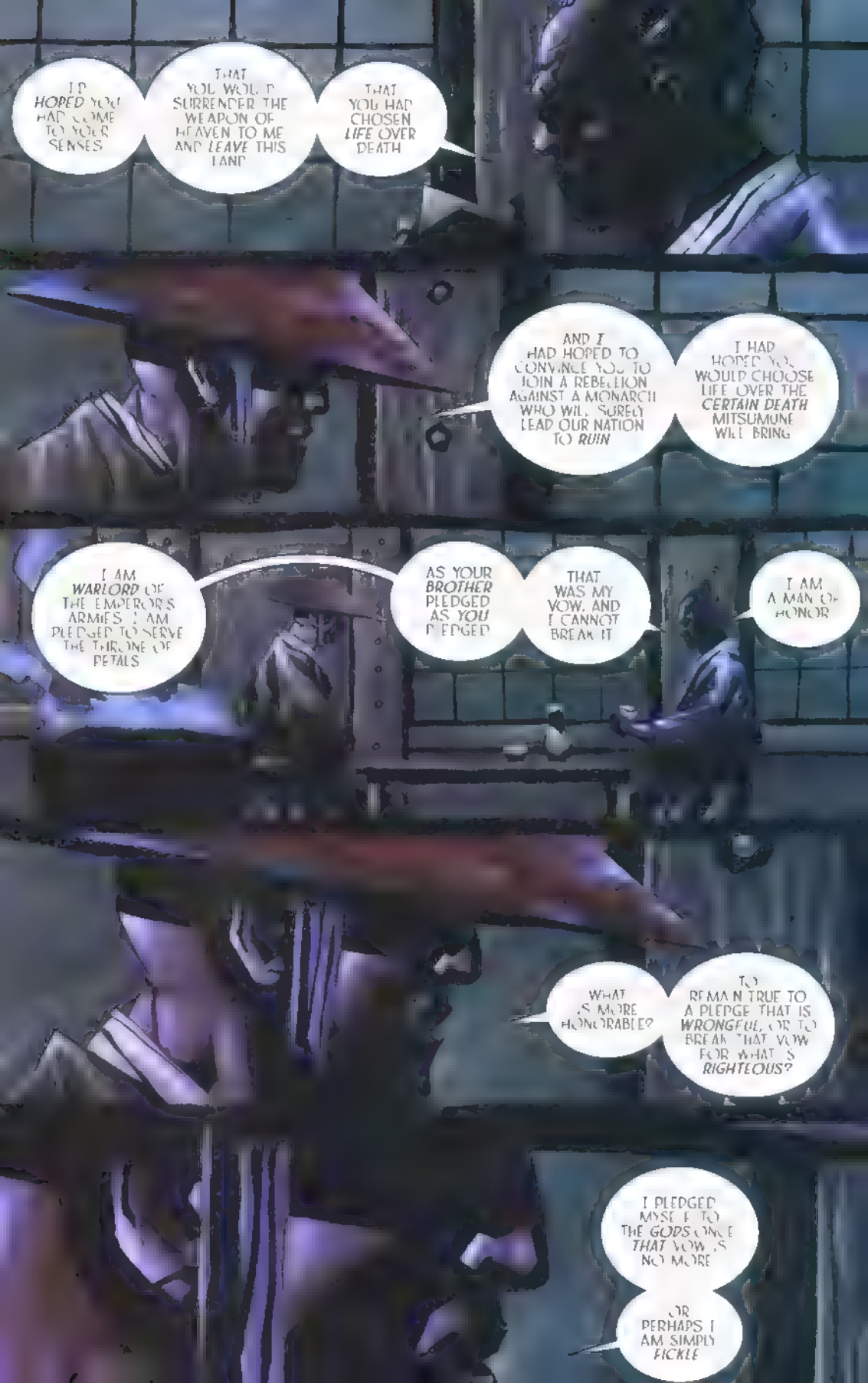
SAKE
YES SIR
YOU
YOU ARE *OUT OF PLACE* HERE WITH YOUR FINE ROBES CONCEALED BENEATH A THREADBARE CLOAK
I AM NO CONCERN TO YOU
NO?
IT STRIKES ME THAT YOU ARE A SLUMMING NOBLEMAN *AMUSED* BY MINGLING WITH THOSE YOU BELIEVE ARE BENEATH YOU
BUT I AM NOT HERE FOR YOUR *AMUSEMENT*
YOU'VE HAD TOO MUCH TO *DRINK*
GO BACK TO YOUR TABLE

MAKE ME
BE WISE ENOUGH TO LEAVE ME IN PEACE, SWORDSMAN
DRUNK IS NOT WAY TO DIE
AND COWARDLY
IS NO WAY TO LIVE
I DID WARN YOU
...
GO AWAY

NOW
YOU WILL GO AWAY
THE FASHION IN WHICH THAT HAPPENS IS FOR THE MOMENT YOUR CHOICE
WISE
GO AND STAND IN THE RAIN UNTIL YOU ARE SOBER
HE WOULD HAVE BEEN NO CHALLENGE TO YOU
I MERELY WISHED TO AVOID BLOOD BEING SPILLED NEEDLESSLY
TO PONDER THE FUTURE
MY THANKS
I REGRET SUCH A DISTURBANCE OCCURRED HERE PEOPLE DON'T COME TO A PLACE SUCH AS THIS FOR SOLITUDE

JOIN ME AT MY TABLE
OF COURSE
IT'S THE LEAST I OWE YOU AFTER THE *EFFORT* YOU'VE EXPENDED ON MY BEHALF
IT WAS NOTHING
WE ARE BETTER SERVED TAKING ADVANTAGE OF THIS *CALM* RATHER THAN EXPOSED TO THE GRIM WEATHER THAT BEARS DOWN
FOR YOU, SIR
SOME WOULD SAY A *GREAT STORM* CLOSES IN UPON YAZAK
POSSIBLY
BUT I EXPECT YAZAK'S WALLS ARE STURDY ENOUGH TO WITHSTAND *ANY* STORM
EVEN SO, I AM HOPEFUL THE WEATHER WILL *CLEAR*

DO YOU *REMEMBER* THIS PLACE?
IT WAS HERE THAT YOUR BROTHER SLEW IN LESS TIME THAN IT TAKES TO TELL
WHAT WAS IT *SIX* OF THE NOGAWA CLAN?
SEVEN
SEVEN. THEN
AND NOW IT REACHES MY EARS THAT YOU HAVE *ALLIED* YOURSELF WITH THEM
I INTEND TO *OVERTHROW* MITSUMUNE IN ORDER TO DO SO I WILL NEED AN ARMY
BUT THE VERY *ENEMIES* OF YOUR OWN CLAN?
DOES IT NOT SEEM *WRONG* TO YOU?
AND THE LAST I WAS AWARE *YOU* WERE IN CONTROL OF THIS LAND'S ONLY ARMY RYUICHI
WHO *ELSE* AM I TO ALLY WITH?
DOES IT NOT SEEM WRONG TO *YOU* THAT I AM FORCED TO THIS?
I HAVE NO LOVE FOR THE NOGAWAS. BUT IF I AM TO *PRESERVE* THIS LAND I HAVE PITIFUL FEW OPTIONS
THE STARVING MAN CANNOT AFFORD TO CHOOSE HIS MEA


I'D HOPED YOU HAD COME TO YOUR SENSES
THAT YOU WOULD SURRENDER THE WEAPON OF HEAVEN TO ME AND LEAVE THIS LAND
THAT YOU HAD CHOSEN LIFE OVER DEATH
AND I HAD HOPED TO CONVINCE YOU TO JOIN A REBELLION AGAINST A MONARCH WHO WILL SURELY LEAD OUR NATION TO RUIN
I HAD HOPED YOU WOULD CHOOSE LIFE OVER THE CERTAIN DEATH MITSUMUNE WILL BRING
I AM WARLORD OF THE EMPEROR'S ARMIES. I AM PLEDGED TO SERVE THE THRONE OF PETALS
AS YOUR BROTHER PLEDGED AS YOU PLEDGED
THAT WAS MY VOW. AND I CANNOT BREAK IT
I AM A MAN OF HONOR
WHAT IS MORE HONORABLE?
TO REMAIN TRUE TO A PLEDGE THAT IS WRONGFUL, OR TO BREAK THAT VOW FOR WHAT IS RIGHTEOUS?
I PLEDGED MYSELF TO THE GODS ONCE THAT VOW IS NO MORE
OR PERHAPS I AM SIMPLY FICKLE

THIS IS NO TIME FOR JEST!
LET ME TELL YOU WHAT I HAVE SEEN WITH MY OWN EYES
I SAT WITH THE EMPEROR AT THE KABUKI, A DRAMA WHOSE SUBJECT WOULD HAVE BEEN OF *MUCH* INTEREST TO YOU
AND *YOU* STAND NO CHANCE AGAINST HIM
PLEASE, FOR THE LAST TIME
GIVE ME THE WEAPON
THERE IN FULL VIEW OF ALL, HIS COURTESAN YUKIO REVEALED HER *TRUE* SELF: SHE WAS A *DEMON*, A FOUL CREATURE OF SHADOW
AND MITSUNE *DESTROYED* HER AS IF SHE WERE NO MORE THAN AN INSECT BENEATH HIS FOOT
HE IS NO LONGER *HUMAN*
THE WEAPON IS IN A *SAFE PLACE*
I COULD NOT GIVE IT TO YOU EVEN IF I WISHED TO DO SO
I TRULY HAVE *NO CHOICE*, RYUCHI
THEN YOU LEAVE *ME* NO CHOICE

YOU REALIZE THE NEXT TIME WE SEE ONE ANOTHER SHALL BE ON A *BATTLEFIELD*
I MUST GO
I WISH SOMETHING *OTHER* WERE POSSIBLE
FAREWELL MY FRIEND
OBO-SAN
HOW DO YOU KNOW I DO NOT HAVE MY MEN OUTSIDE WAITING TO *TAKE* YOU?

BECAUSE YOU ARE A MAN OF HONOR

SHOW YOURSELF

YOU ARE BLESSED WITH UNUSUALLY KEEN POWERS OF *OBSERVATION*, OBO-SAN
I FIND IT BEHOOVES ME TO BE AWARE OF MY *SURROUNDINGS*, STORYTELLER
ESPECIALLY NOW
IT IS AS I HAVE SAID
I WISH TO KNOW WHERE YOUR PATH LEADS HOW YOUR *STORY* ENDS
I AM CURIOUS AS TO WHY I FIND YOU *HERE*, IN THE HEART OF IMPERIAL POWER
DO YOU *FOLLOW* ME?
IT SEEMS *YOU* ARE BLESSED WITH AN ABILITY TO APPEAR IN THE MOST UNEXPECTED OF PLACES
IN TRUTH I AM *GLAD* YOU ARE PRESENT
I HAVE WANTED TO SPEAK WITH YOU
INDEED

AS WAR IMPENDS, IT BECOMES EVEN MORE NECESSARY THAT I BE ABLE TO *TRUST* THOSE AROUND ME
MANY OF MY ALLIES HAVE BEEN KNOWN TO ME FOR YEARS
"WULF AND AIKO WERE MY BROTHER'S LIEUTENANTS. THEIR LIVES ARE PLEDGED TO ME, AS THEY WERE TO HIM.
"I KNOW YAMA AND KONOSKE-SAN OF OLD, FROM MY TIME LIVING AT THE MONASTERY.
"EVEN SOJIROU-SAN, WHOM I HAVE KNOWN ONLY BRIEFLY, HAS PROVEN HIMSELF LOYAL."
BUT *YOU*...
OF YOU I REMAIN *UNCERTAIN*

I ASSURE YOU I POSE NO *THREAT*, OBO-SAN
I WOULD BE A *FRIEND* TO YOU
SO YOU HAVE SAID
ONE OF MY FRIENDS SITS UPON THE THRONE AND HAS ORDERED MY DEATH
ANOTHER IS HONOR BOUND TO *KILL ME* WHEN WE MEET UPON THE FIELD OF BATTLE
I BELIEVE I HAVE QUITE ENOUGH *FRIENDS*
YOU APPEARED SHORTLY AFTER MY BROTHER WAS MURDERED BY THE SAME GODS TO WHOM HE PRAYED FOR DELIVERANCE
I FIND *THAT* CURIOUS AS WELL
SURELY YOU ACCEPT *COINCIDENCE* AS WELL
I DOUBT WHETHER *ANYTHING* IS TRULY COINCIDENCE
YOU ASK THAT I *TRUST* YOU, YET YOU HIDE EVEN YOUR *NAME* FROM ME
THOSE THINGS THAT ARE *HIDDEN*
ARE OFTEN THE MOST *DANGEROUS*
I WONDER AT YOUR *TRUE NATURE*, STORYTELLER I WONDER WHAT IT IS THAT YOU *ARE*

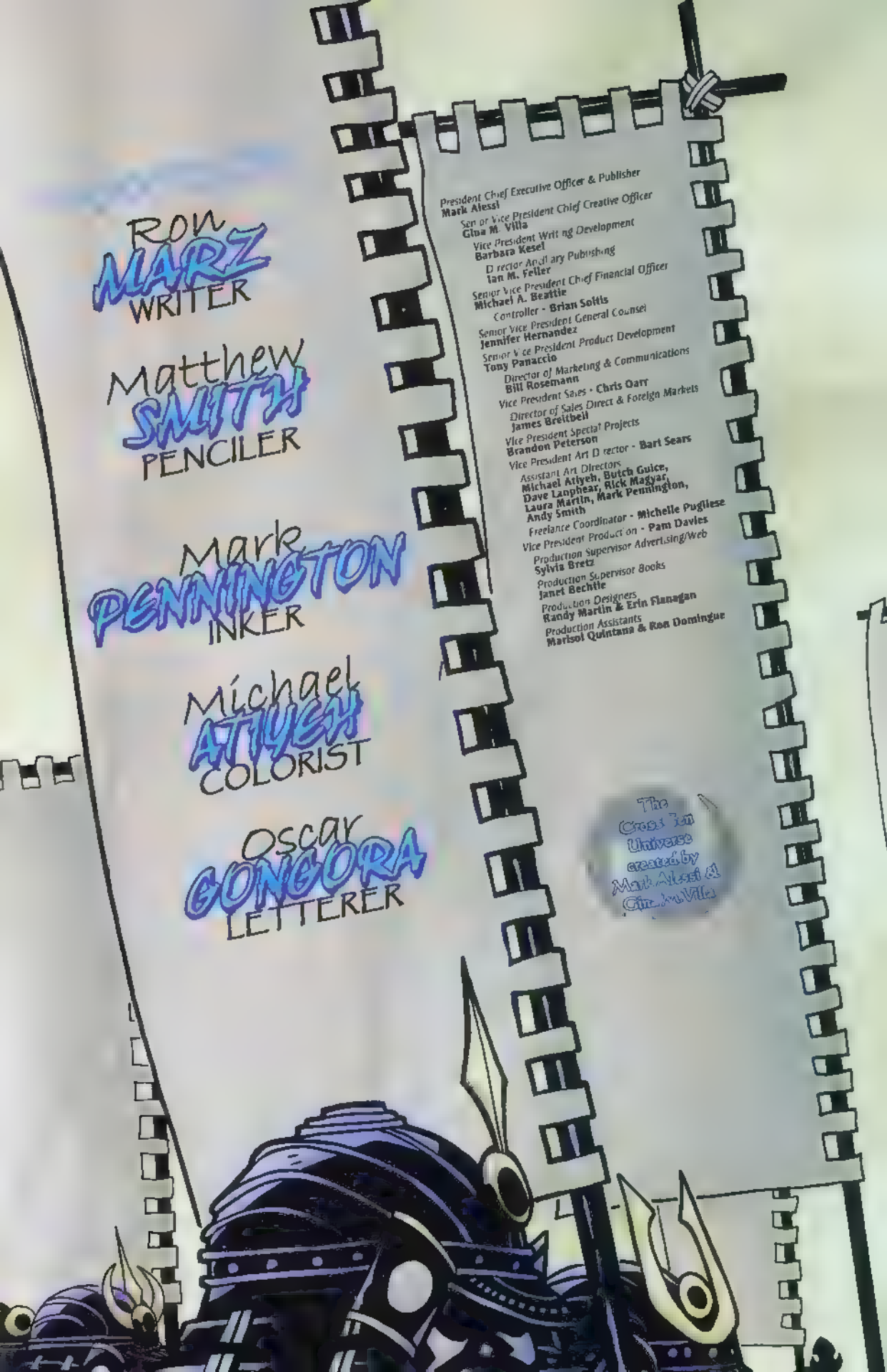
THE WEAPON
EVEN THE GODS FEARED IT UPON THE FIELD WHERE THEY SLEW MY BROTHER
OBO SAN
THAT IS NOT A THING TO BE WIELDED CARELESSLY
I HAVE WONDERED AT THIS
IF THE WEAPON IS SUCH A PRECIOUS THING
THEY FLED BEFORE IT
COWARDS
WOULD THE GODS NOT LEAVE ONE OF THEIR OWN BEHIND TO WATCH OVER IT?

YOU SPARE ME
FOR NOW
REMEMBER MY MERCY
AND REMEMBER THAT I HOLD THE POWER TO DESTROY YOU
I DO NOT NEED GODS
MUCH THE SAME COULD BE SAID OF AN EMPEROR AND HIS PEOPLE
IN MY EXPERIENCE GODS NEED MEN FAR MORE THAN MEN NEED GODS

YOU SURPRISE ME OBO SAN YOU WOULD *BARGAIN* WITH THOSE YOU HAVE SWORN *VENGEANCE* AGAINST?
MY CONCERN IS MY HOME, AND'S *SURVIVAL*
TO ENSURE *THAT*..
I WOULD BARGAIN WITH *ANYONE*
THERE WILL COME A TIME WHEN I WILL CALL UPON YOU TO *SERVE* ME STORYTELLER
WHEN I DO SO, THINK UPON WHAT TRANSPIRED HERE
AS WELL AS WHAT *COULD* HAVE TRANSPIRED
I UNDERSTAND
I TRUST I WILL FIND YOU AT TAKAHASHI WHEN I RETURN THERE?
YOUR TRUST WILL NOT BE *MISPLACED*, OBO SAN

OBO-SAN
WHY DID YOU NOT *KILL* HIM?
HE MAY BE USEFUL TO US IN THE FUTURE
I CANNOT AFFORD TO ELIMINATE *ANY* POSSIBLE ALLIES EVEN THOSE WHOSE *MOTIVES* MAY BE QUESTIONABLE

THIS IS A DANGEROUS GAME YOU PLAY OBO-SAN
BECAUSE I HAVE LITTLE CHOICE TO DO *OTHERWISE*, AIKO
THE LUXURY OF *TIME* WE ONCE HAD IS NOW GONE
THE WAR *BEGINS*
WOLF, RIDE NORTH AND SUMMON THE NOGAWAS AND THE BORU
THEY CAN MAKE CAMP ON THE PLAINS OUTSIDE THE MONASTERY WE SHALL AGREE ON A PLAN OF BATTLE
THEN WE MOVE SOUTH TO FACE RYUICHI'S FORCES
IT WILL BE AS YOU WISH, OBO-SAN
I SHALL RETURN AS QUICKLY AS I CAN
LET US BE *GONE* FROM THIS PLACE
THE NEXT TIME WE ARE IN THIS CITY IT WILL BE BECAUSE WE HAVE *CONQUERED* IT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Thus Far On

The Path

The monk Obo-san reluctantly has decided to rebel against his friend, the Emperor Mitsumune, ruler of the feudal kingdom of Nayado. Mitsumune appears mad at the very least, having been resurrected from the dead and displaying powers far beyond mortal scope.

Obo-san is armed with the Weapon of Heaven, an object of terrible might left behind by the gods. These are the same gods against whom Obo-san has sworn eventual vengeance for the death of his brother, the warlord Todosi.

Aiding Obo-san in his efforts are his comrades Wulf and Aiko, who have helped him recruit an army for the rebellion. Obo-san has sent Wulf northward to bring the warriors of the Nogawa clan, once enemies but now allies.

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IT WILL BE A FINE HARVEST

THE BEST IN YEARS
BECAUSE OF *YOUR* LABORS, INOKI-SAN
IT'S *YOU* WHO NURSED THE CROP THROUGH THE SUMMER'S DROUGHT
YOU GIVE ME FAR MORE OF THE CREDIT THAN IS DESERVED, SAIGO
THE *WHOLE* OF THE VILLAGE LABORED THE WHOLE OF THE VILLAGE REAPS THE *BENEFIT*
THERE'S WHEAT ENOUGH TO LAST US THROUGH THE WINTER
DO YOU
HEAR THAT?

HORSES
THEY RIDE UNDER THE NOGAWA BANNER
WHY?
WHY WOULD SAMURAI COME HERE?

SO MANY OF THEM

"... AN ENTIRE ARMY"

RUN TO THE VILLAGE SAIGO TELL EVERYONE TO STAY INSIDE

PERHAPS THE SOLDIERS WILL SIMPLY PASS US BY

YES, INOKI-SAN

HURRY!

SOLDIERS!
NOGAWA SOLDIERS APPROACH!
STAY INSIDE YOUR HOMES!
DO NOTHING TO PROVOKE THEM!
SAIGO?
WHAT IS HAPPENING?
HIORI
SAMURAI ARE RIDING TOWARDS THE VILLAGE
ARE WE GOING TO BE SAFE?
WE SHOULD BE
WHAT DO WE HAVE THAT THEY WOULD WANT?
GO INSIDE!
I'LL COME TO YOU AS SOON AS I CAN!

NOGAWA SOLDIERS RIDE FROM THE NORTH!
GO INSIDE YOUR HOMES AND -
THE IMPERIAL ARMY

WHAT
WHAT DO YOU WANT HERE?
WE CAN'T HAVE THIS FOOL ANNOUNCING US TO THE NOGAWAS
PLEASE
KILL HIM

WE LL RIDE AROJND
WE GAIN NOTHING BY DISTURBING THE VILLAGE
DAMN
AHH!

AMBUSH!
MITSUMUNE'S FORCES DISCOVERED OUR ROUTE AND *HID* THEMSELVES ON THE FAR SIDE OF THE VILLAGE!
NNGH!
IF WE STAY HERE WE'LL BE CUT DOWN LIKE *LIVESTOCK* AT SLAUGHTER!
THESE ARE YOUR MEN, LORD SHIGETADA SAN! THEY'LL LISTEN ONLY TO YOUR COMMANDS!
MY MEN *KNEW* WE WOULD FIGHT THE IMPERIALS, JUST NOT SO SOON
FOLLOW, NOGAWA WARRIORS

WE GO THROUGH THEM!
THEY'RE COMING
STEADY

HAAAA!

HLRG!
YOUR REBELLION WILL END *HERE*, OUTLAND TRAITOR!
WE ARE ALL BOUND BY *HONOR* TO SERVE OUR EMPEROR!
THEN YOU'LL ALL *DIE* FOR HIM
HOLD!
HOLD YOUR LINES!

STAND FAST!
COWARDS!
COME TO ME
I WILL SHOW YOU A WARRIOR

GHH!
HGK!
uhn
WAAA...
...AAA...
...AAH...
GET OUT OF THE STREET, BOY!
YOU'RE LUCKY YOU WEREN'T RIDDEN DOWN INTO THE

HYAAGH!
STUPID BEAST
COME HERE!
I'LL MAKE A MOUNT OF YOU
OR A CARCASS
WULF!
THE IMPERIALS OUTNUMBER US, BUT THEY ARE GREEN. WE FIGHT UNTRAINED RECRUITS
THEY WILL CRUMBLE WITHOUT LEADERSHIP

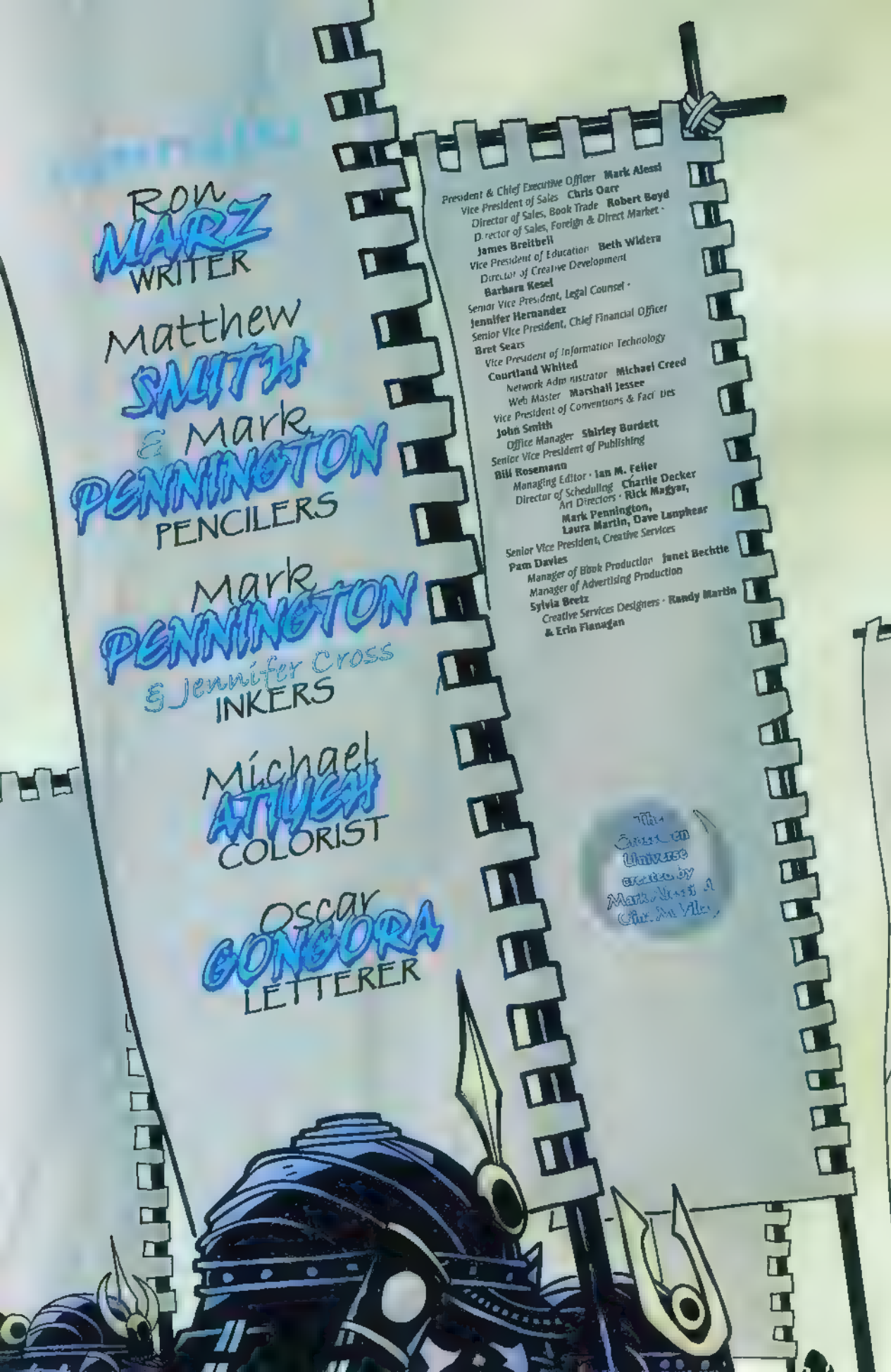
THEN, WE WILL MAKE THEM FEARLESS
MOVE, BEAST
WE HAVE A MAN TO KILL
YOU LEAD THIS RABBLE?
THESE ARE NOT SOLDIERS THESE ARE FARM BOYS AND OLD MEN
HN

UFF!
SPEAK TO ME OF RABBLE?
I AT LEAST COMMAND TROOPS WHO UNDERSTAND LOYALTY AND HONOR
THEN I WILL SPARE YOU THE DISHONOR
OF LIVING LONG ENOUGH TO WITNESS THEIR DEFEAT

WHO?
WHO WILL LEAD YOU *NOW*?

"THEY ALL FLEE"
LIKE THE CRAVEN DOGS THEY ARE
MY MEN WILL HUNT THEM DOWN AND SLAY THEM
SPARE SOME OF THEM, SHIGETADA-SAN LET THEM SPREAD WORD OF THEIR DEFEAT AT OUR HANDS
WE ACCOMPLISHED MUCH. THE IMPERIALS WERE SERVED NOTICE. OUR CASUALTIES WERE FEW

AND NOTHING OF CONSEQUENCE WAS LOST THIS DAY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Thus Far On

The Path

The monk Obo-san leads a rebellion against his friend, the Emperor Mitsumune, ruler of the feudal kingdom of Nayado. Mitsumune appears mad at the very least, having been resurrected from the dead and displaying powers far beyond mortal scope.

Obo-san is armed with the Weapon of Heaven, an object of terrible might left behind by the gods. These are the same gods against whom Obo-san has sworn vengeance for the death of his brother, the warlord Todosi.

The first battle of the war has been fought, with Todosi's allies emerging victorious. But as the imperial forces gather, other factions plot against the rebels.

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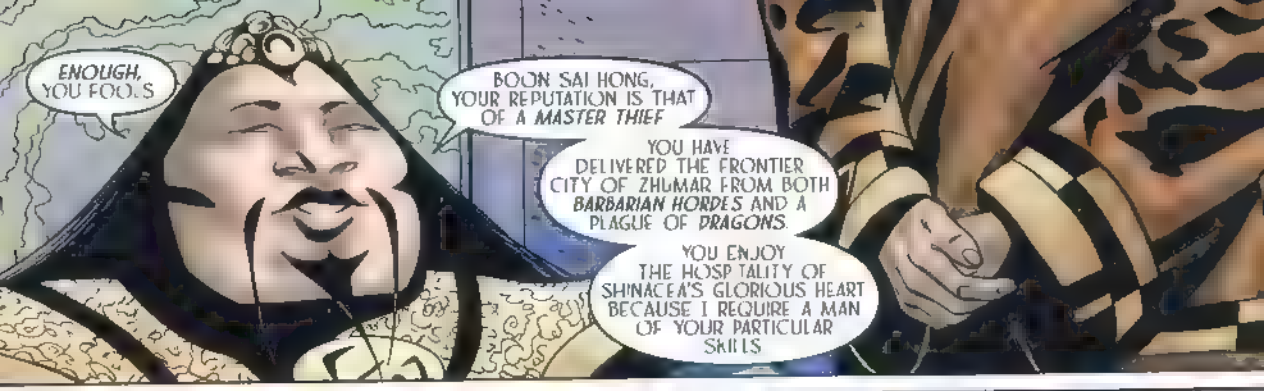
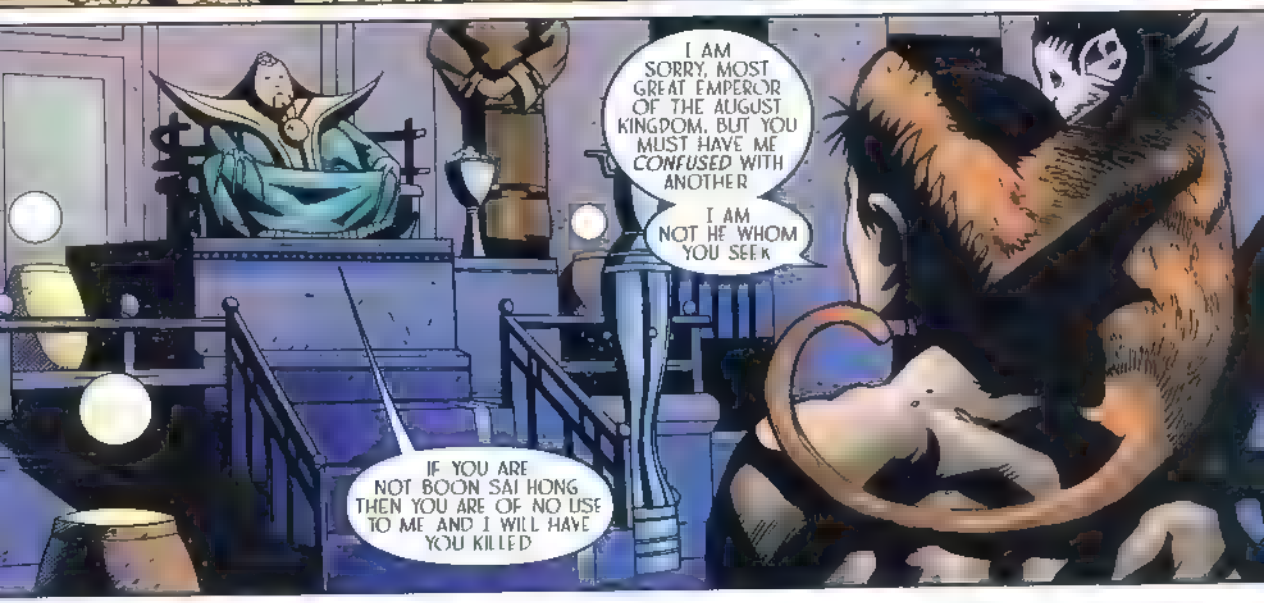
WHAT IS THAT?

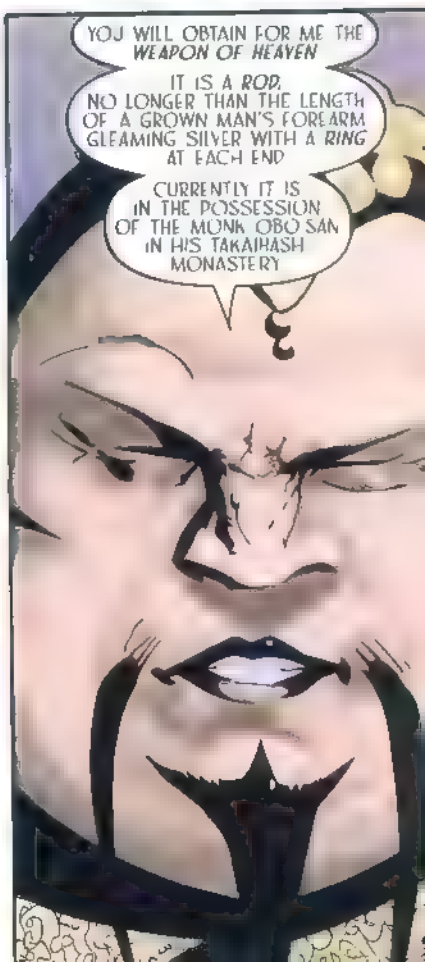
HIS MONKEY, GREAT EMPEROR ZHENG
THE BEAST WOULD NOT LEAVE THE THIEF'S SIDE
I WOULD NOT DO THAT IF I WERE YOU
HE DOESN'T LIKE IT WHEN YOU PULL HIS TAIL. SOMETIMES HE EVEN
EYAAH!
I TOLD YOU SO


ENOUGH, YOU FOOLS
BOON SAI HONG, YOUR REPUTATION IS THAT OF A MASTER THIEF
YOU HAVE DELIVERED THE FRONTIER CITY OF ZHUMAR FROM BOTH BARBARIAN HORDES AND A PLAGUE OF DRAGONS.
YOU ENJOY THE HOSPITALITY OF SHINACEA'S GLORIOUS HEART BECAUSE I REQUIRE A MAN OF YOUR PARTICULAR SKILLS


I AM SORRY, MOST GREAT EMPEROR OF THE AUGUST KINGDOM. BUT YOU MUST HAVE ME CONFUSED WITH ANOTHER
I AM NOT HE WHOM YOU SEEK
IF YOU ARE NOT BOON SAI HONG THEN YOU ARE OF NO USE TO ME AND I WILL HAVE YOU KILLED

Oh, BOON SAI HONG!
I THOUGHT YOU SAID POON FEI LHONG, WHO IS OF COURSE A COMPLETELY DIFFERENT PERSON
BOON SAI HONG AT YOUR SERVICE, GREAT EMPEROR

I WISH YOU TO STEAL AN ITEM FOR ME, ONE THAT HAS THUS FAR ELUDED MY GRASP
IT IS LOCATED IN THE NATION OF NAYADO. I ONCE HAD AN AGENT THERE
BUT SHE WAS NOT THE EQUAL OF HER TASK SHE HAS BEEN DESTROYED


YOU WILL OBTAIN FOR ME THE WEAPON OF HEAVEN
IT IS A ROD, NO LONGER THAN THE LENGTH OF A GROWN MAN'S FOREARM GLEAMING SILVER WITH A RING AT EACH END
CURRENTLY IT IS IN THE POSSESSION OF THE MONK OBO SAN IN HIS TAKAIHASH MONASTERY

JOURNEY ALL THE WAY TO NAYADO FOR A *TRINKET*?
I THINK I WOULD RATHER *NOT*
KILL HIM
SHALL I BRING THIS WEAPON OF HEAVEN BACK *HERE*, OR IS THERE SOMEONE YOU WISH ME TO *DELIVER* IT TO?
YOU WILL DELIVER IT TO *ME* PERSONALLY
DO THIS THING SUCCESSFULLY BOON SAI HONG, AND I WILL GRANT YOU A *PARDON*
BOTH FOR ACTS YOU HAVE *ALREADY* COMMITTED AS WELL AS ANY INDISCRETIONS THAT MIGHT LIE IN YOUR *FUTURE*
SO THAT MEANS YOU WOULD NEVER AGAIN SEND SOLDIERS TO *KILL* ME?
YOU WOULD LEAVE ME ALONE?
FOR A MASTER THIEF, YOU ARE NO GREAT *INTELLECT*
YES, THAT IS WHAT *"PARDON"* MEANS
RELEASE HIM FROM HIS SHACKLES AND ARRANGE HIS TRANSPORT TO NAYADO

AND MAKE CERTAIN HE TAKES THAT MANGY CREATURE WITH HIM!
DO NOT DISAPPOINT ME BOON SA HONG.
THE WAGES OF DOING SO WOULD BE MOST UNPLEASANT FOR YOU.
STOP GIVING HIM THAT LOOK! DO YOU HE'S THE EMPEROR
I SHOULD HAVE THOUGHT OF THIS LONG AGO! EUNUCH! IF YOU WISH SOMETHING TAKEN, YOU SEND A THIEF.
SOON THE WEAPON AND ALL NAYADO WILL BELONG TO ME.
IT IS SAID BOON IS THE GREATEST THIEF IN ALL SHINAERA.
BUT NOT THE SMARTEST ONCE HE HAS SURRENDERED THE WEAPON.
HAVE HIM EXECUTED.

"OUR CAUSE IS AS THE CAMPFIRES OF OUR ARMY SMALL, BRIGHT HOPES SURROUNDED BY CONSUMING DARKNESS"
ALL NAYADO DEPENDS ON US
THOUGH OUR OWN FORCES ARE BADLY OUTNUMBERED BY THOSE OF THE EMPEROR
WE HAVE COME TOGETHER FOR COMMON PURPOSE
WE WILL *DEPOSE* THE MADMAN WHO NOW SITS UPON THE THRONE OF PETALS AND LEADS OUR NATION DOWN THE PATH TO *RUIN*

WE ARE BOLSTERED BY THE WARRIORS OF THE NOGAWA CLAN, LED BY SHIGETADA SAN
AS WELL AS THE URMAYU'S BORU
AND THE MONKS OF THIS ORDER, UNDER KONOSKE SAN
WE ARE NOT MANY, BUT IT WILL HAVE TO BE ENOUGH
THOSE SAMURAI WHO WERE ONCE LOYAL TO MY OWN CLAN HAVE BEEN IMPRISONED BY MITSUMUNE
FIRST BLOOD BELONGED TO US
WE AT LEAST SENT MITSUMUNE NOTICE THAT WE ARE TO BE RECKONED WITH
ONCE MY HORSEMEN DESTROYED THE IMPERIAL FORCES LYING IN AMBUSH, MY INFANTRY WAS ABLE TO MARCH HERE TO YOUR MONASTERY UNMOLESTED
BUT A BATTLE IS NOT A WAR
INDEED
YOU'VE BROUGHT THE MAP, WULF?
HERE, OBO SAN
THE IMPERIAL SUPERIORITY IN NUMBERS FORCES US TO CHOOSE OUR PLACE OF ENGAGEMENT MOST CAREFULLY

WE ARE HERE
THE MAIN FORCE OF THE IMPERIAL ARMY IS ARRAYED NEAR YAZAKI, THERE
WE LEARNED IN THE SKIRMISH THAT THE IMPERIALS ARE NUMEROUS, BUT THEY ARE RAW AND LACKING IN TRAINING
AN ADVANTAGE TO BE EXPLOITED
JUST SO
I PROPOSE WE LURE THEM TO A SINGLE DECISIVE BATTLE, BEFORE THEY BECOME SEASONED SOLDIERS
WE CAN MEET THEM AT THE PLAINS OF HONGASHI AND UNLEASH OUR FULL FURY UPON THEM. THEY WILL BREAK AND RUN BEFORE US
FORGIVE ME IF I DISAGREE SHIGETADA SAN, BUT I BELIEVE TIME IS OUR ALLY, NOT OUR ENEMY
WE ARE BETTER SERVED KEEPING MITSUMUNE'S MEN OCCUPIED WITH SKIRMISHES UNTIL THE SEASON CHANGES IN A MONTH'S TIME
THEN WE LURE THEM TO THE ENONAKI PASS, AND ATTACK FROM THE HIGH GROUND
THE SUMMER RAINS WILL TURN THE VALLEY INTO A QUAGMIRE. THEIR RETREAT WILL BE SLOWED, IF NOT IMPOSSIBLE
WE WILL TRAP THEM AND DESTROY THEM AT OUR LEISURE HERE
WHILE I AM AWARE OF YOUR REPUTATION AS A WARRIOR, LADY AIKO
I MUST ASK IF YOU HAVE EVER LED TROOPS INTO BATTLE
THE LADY AIKO HAS BEEN A LOYAL SERVANT TO THE TSUGAWA CLAN FOR MANY YEARS. I TRUST HER AS I WOULD ANY MAN
I CARE NOT WHERE SAGE COUNSEL COMES FROM. ONLY THAT IT GIVES US THE BEST CHANCE AT VICTORY

OF COURSE, OBO SAN. I, TOO, WISH ONLY WHAT IS *BEST* FOR THE REBELLION
IF *YOU* ACCEPT THE WISDOM OF AIKO'S STRATEGY, I DO AS WELL. I CARE ONLY ABOUT THE *DOWNFALL* OF MITSUMUNE
THE *INSTRUMENT* OF THAT DOWNFALL RESTS CLOSE TO MY HEART.
I DOUBT EVEN MITSUMUNE, *WHATEVER* HE HAS BECOME, CAN STAND BEFORE SUCH A DEVICE
IF THERE ARE NO OTHER OBJECTIONS
WE WILL HARASS RYUICHI'S ARMY IN THE WEEKS AHEAD, THEN INVITE IT INTO THE ENONAKI PASS, FROM WHICH THERE WILL BE *NO RETURN*
WE SHALL TOAST OUR EVENTUAL TRIUMPH
LADY AYA?
YES OBO-SAN
YOU *SURPRISE* ME OBO SAN
I HAD THOUGHT A *MONK* WOULD NOT PARTAKE OF WINE

THERE IS *MUCH* ABOUT ME YOU WOULD FIND SURPRISING
MY FRIENDS
I GIVE YOU *VICTORY*

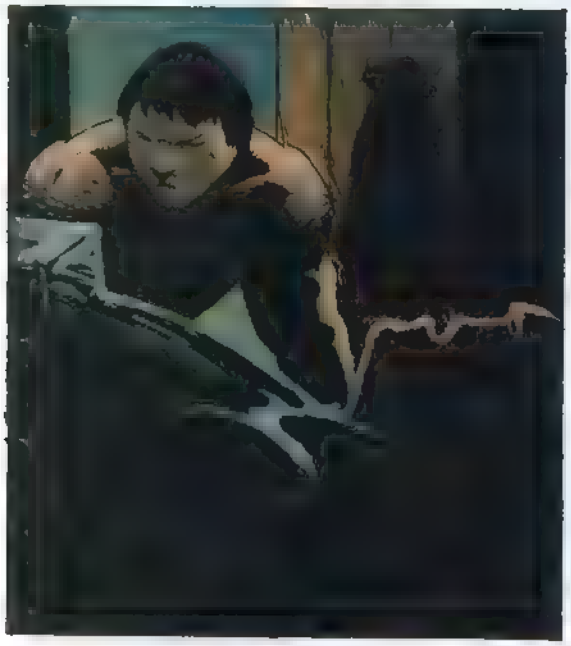
I *LOOK FORWARD* TO THE COMING BATTLES OBO SAN
WE SHALL GIVE NAYADO THE RULER IT *DESERVES*
OF THAT I AM *CERTAIN*, SHIGETADA SAN
SLEEP WELL
OBO SAN THE NOGAWA TROOPS
I *KNOW*
BUT IT IS FOR ME TO DECIDE FOR OUR ALLIES
AND IT IS FOR ME TO FOLLOW YOUR ORDERS SAN WHATEVER YOUR DECISIONS

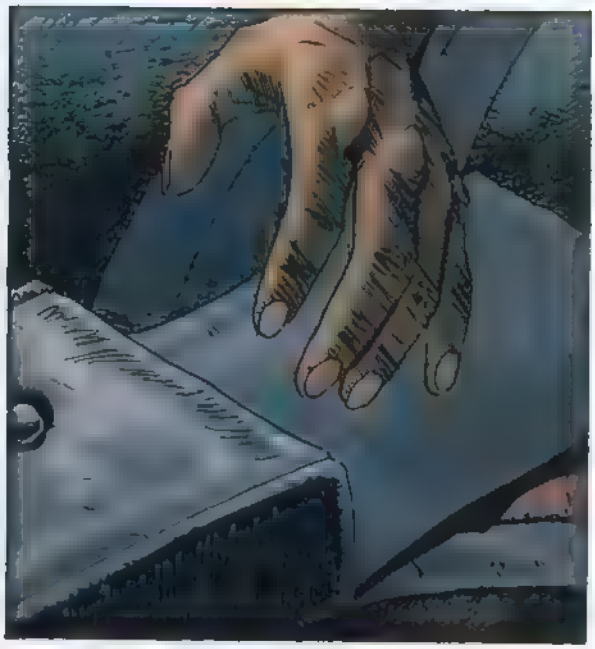
I BELIEVE WE'VE HAD ENOUGH TALK OF WAR FOR ONE EVENING. TIME OUR ATTENTION WAS TURNED TO MORE GENTLE PURSUITS.
THE LADY AYA AND I ARE BOUND FOR MY CHAMBERS. IF I WERE TO HAVE YOU FOLLOW ANY OF MY ADVICE, IT WOULD BE THIS.
NONE OF US KNOWS HOW MUCH TIME REMAINS FOR US IN THIS WORLD, MY FRIEND.
DON'T STAND IDLE AND LET IT BE FOR NAUGHT
HE'S RIGHT
AIKO?
WULF SPEAKS TRULY. THERE IS SO LITTLE TIME LEFT TO US.
WE WOULD BE FOOLS TO WASTE IT

AIKO
I CARE FOR YOU, BUT
I MUST NOT
WHY?
ARE YOU SO SURE THAT THERE WILL BE A TOMORROW, OBO SAN
THAT YOU CAN REFUSE THE THINGS OFFERED TO YOU TODAY?

I DON'T *LIKE* THIS PLACE. WHO BUILDS A MONASTERY ON AN *ISLAND* AND THEN *BLOWS UP* THE BRIDGE THAT LEADS TO IT?
I DON'T EVEN WANT TO BE *IN* NAYADO. IT *SMELLS* FUNNY HERE
STOP YOUR PITIFUL *COMPLAINING*
IF YOU DID NOT WANT TO DO THIS, YOU SHOULD HAVE *REFUSED* THE EMPEROR'S REQUEST
THEN HE WOULD HAVE *KILLED* ME
AND I WOULD BE *FREE* OF YOU
IF I WERE DEAD, WHO WOULD YOU HAVE TO *TORMENT?*
EVERYONE *ELSE*
I WONDER IF THERE IS *RICE WINE* IN THIS PLACE
NOW IS NOT THE TIME FOR DRINKING

YOU ARE SNEAKING INTO A MONASTERY, FILLED WITH WARRIORS WHO WOULD CUT YOUR HEAD FROM YOUR SHOULDERS
JUST SO YOU CAN STEAL AN ALL-POWERFUL WEAPON, AND SURRENDER IT TO A TYRANT
CAN YOU THINK OF A *BETTER* TIME FOR DRINKING?
I CAN THINK OF NO BETTER TIME FOR YOU TO BE *SILENT*
IF THE INFORMATION OF ZHENG'S SPIES IS TRUE
THE ROOM OF THE MONK LIES JUST BEYOND





I WILL BE FREE OF THE FAT FOOL ZHENG!
AH PO PO?
YES?
IS THERE SOMEONE BEHIND ME?
YES
IS HE VERY LARGE?
YES
WHACK
WHY ARE THEY ALWAYS VERY LARGE?!
Ohh

INTRUDER!
UHFF!
HE SEEKS TO STEAL THE WEAPON!
NO DICE WING
YOU ARE NOT EVEN A GOOD THIEF
I WILL SETTLE FOR BEING A LIVE THIEF!

WHFF!
SORRY!
IF YOU KNEW THE BURDEN YOU NOW CARRY
YOU NEVER WOULD HAVE ATTEMPTED TO STEAL IT
IT DOESN'T FEEL THAT HEAVY
NFF!
YOU CAN JUST GET ANOTHER ROD
THING
WHATEVER IT IS
UHNN!

YOU WILL NOT LEAVE THIS ROOM ALIVE, THIEF

WHEN I LEFT [illegible] WITH SWORDS?

Oops

=HH=
=HH=
=HH=

FAR ENOUGH

URRK!

THIS WAY, PO PO

WE NEED TO BE

HELLO

I THOUGHT ZHENG WAS FAT

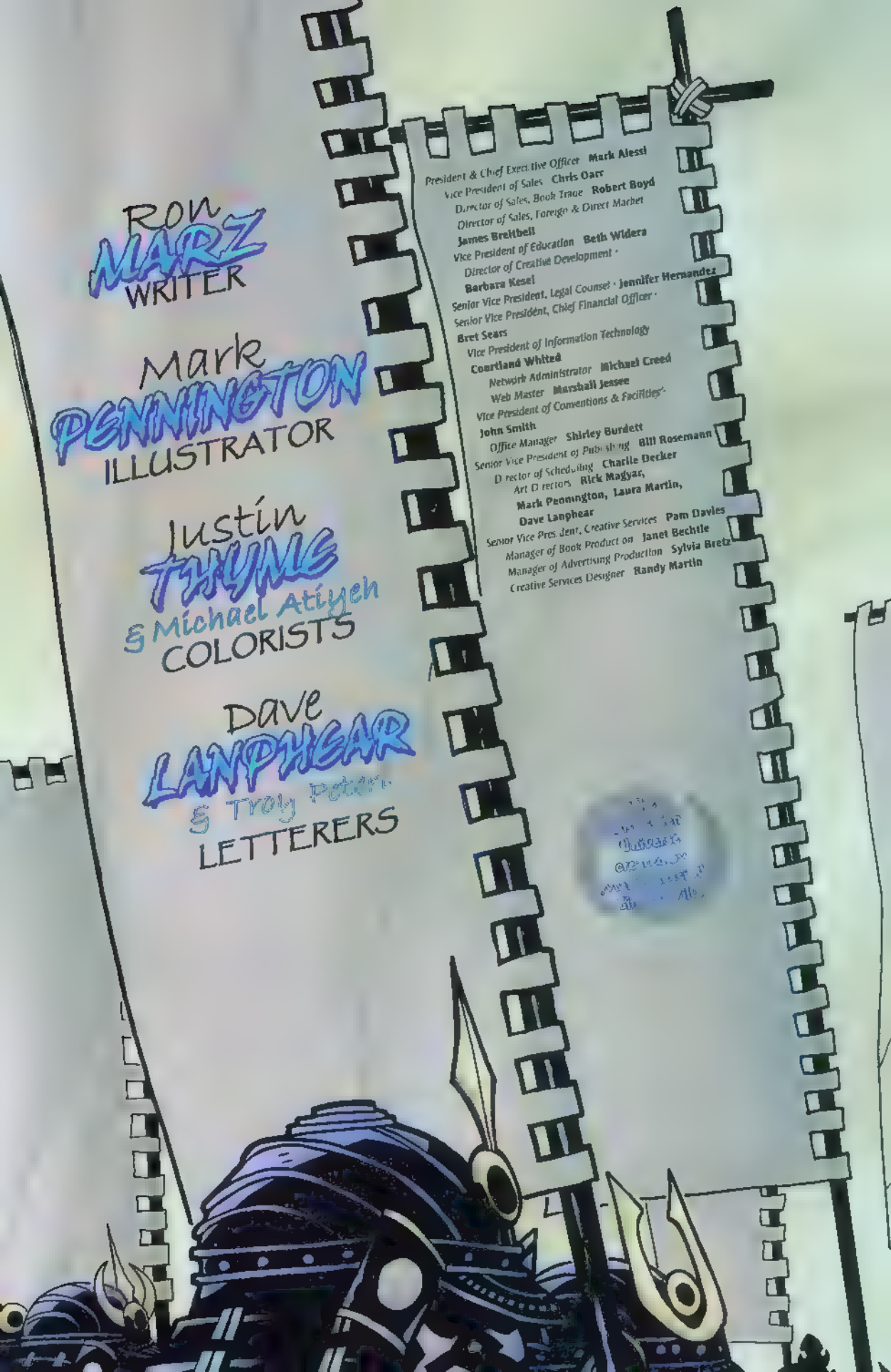
THEY'LL NEVER CATCH US NOW WE'RE

STOP.

PO PO? I

I CANNOT MOVE

OBO SAN?
KILL HIM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Thus Far On

The Path

Obo-san

Mitsumune

The monk Obo-san has reluctantly decided to rebel against his friend, the Emperor Mitsumune, ruler of the feudal kingdom of Nayado. Mitsumune appears mad at the very least, having been resurrected from the dead and displaying powers far beyond mortal scope.

Wulf

Ryuichi

Aiding Obo-san in his efforts are his fellow outsiders Wulf and Aiko, who have helped him recruit an army for the rebellion. In addition to this army, Obo-san also possesses the Weapon of Heaven, an object of terrible might left behind by the gods. Attempting to steal the Weapon, the thief Boon Sai Hong has been caught, and now faces certain death at the hands of Wulf.

Aiko

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WULF...

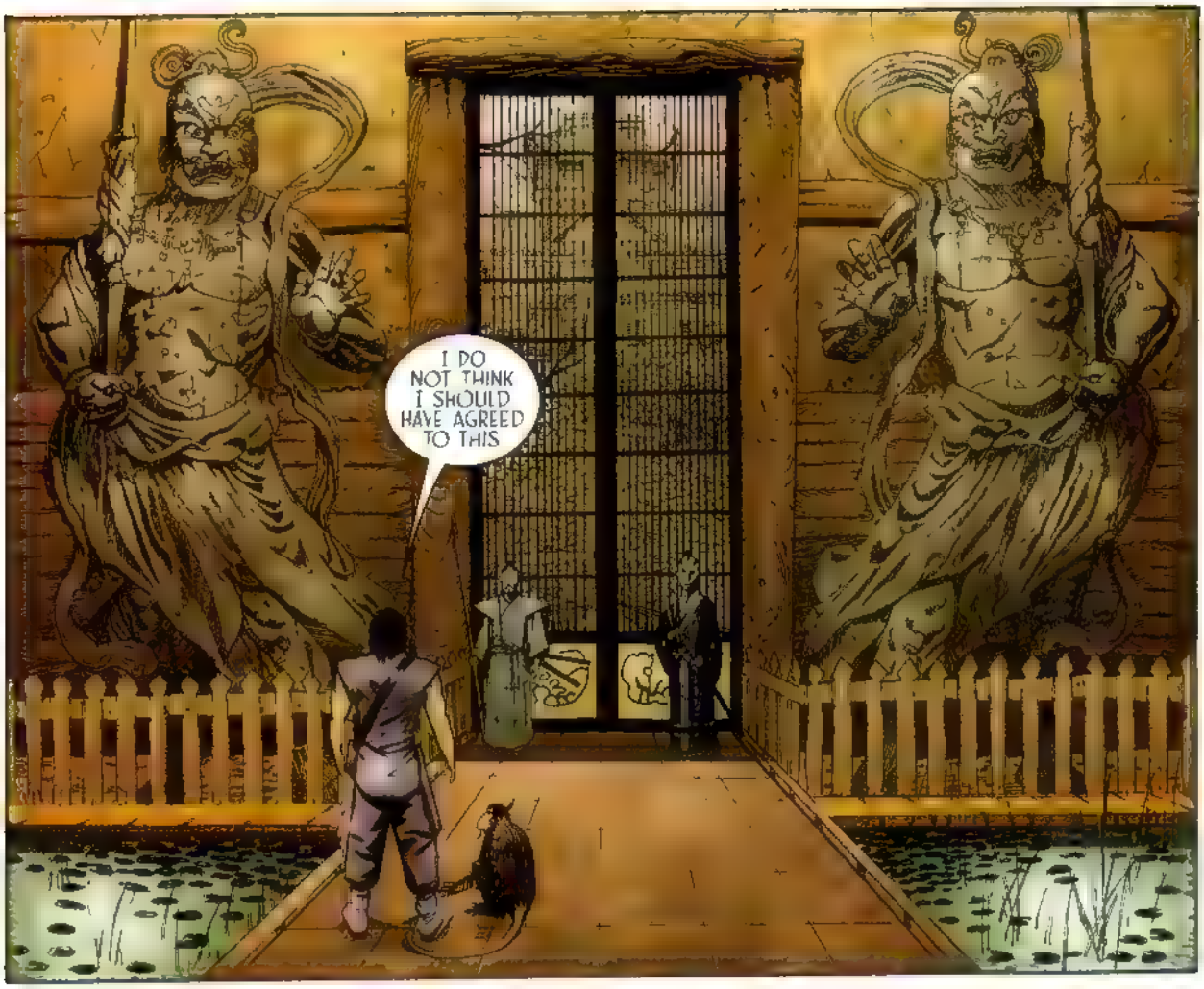
HOLD
YOU'VE HAD A CHANGE OF HEART, OBO-SAN?
WHY DO YOU WISH ME TO SPARE THE THEF?
Ahhh
BECAUSE I CAN THINK OF VERY FEW USES FOR A DEAD THEF
AND BECAUSE DEAD MEN DON'T GIVE UP MANY SECRETS

THOUGH HE WILL GIVE UP THIS
YOU ARE RELEASED
HANG ON, PO PO!
YOU GO NOWHERE, THIEF
IT WOULD HAVE BEEN WISE TO KILL YOU WHEN I HAD THE -
YAAH!
I AM IN YOUR DEBT, PO PO
I TAKE BACK ALL THE HARSH THINGS I SAID ABOUT YOU
MOST OF THEM ANYWAY
WHFF!

IF YOU *MOVE*, THE LAST THING TO COME OUT OF YOUR MOUTH WILL BE THE T.P. OF MY BLADE
IS THAT UNDERSTOOD?
VERY WELL INDEED
AND THE SAME GOES FOR *YOU*, YOU FLEA RIDDEN BEAST
eep
WELL DONE AIKO
NOW WHO *ARE* YOU, THAT YOU WOULD COME HERE TO THIEVE THE WEAPON OF HEAVEN FROM MY VERY BED?
DID *MITSUMUNE* SEND YOU?
I AM *BOON SAI HONG*, AND I *WAS* SENT BY AN EMPEROR
BUT NOT *YOURS*
ZHENG OF SHINACEA COMMANDED ME TO STEAL THE WEAPON, IN EXCHANGE FOR A PARDON
THAT MEANS HE WOULD STOP SENDING SOLDIERS TO *KILL* ME
SO MITSUMUNE DOES *NOT* LIE AT THE HEART OF THIS
THOUGH IT COMES AS NO SURPRISE THAT ZHENG STILL COVETS THE WEAPON

NO.
I BELIEVE HE CAN BE OF *USE* TO US
I WILL BE KILLED IF I RETURN TO ZHENG WITHOUT THE WEAPON
THEN I WOULD ADVISE YOU SHOULD NOT RETURN TO HIM
WHILE THE WEAPON OF HEAVEN IS NOT A PRIZE I CAN ALLOW TO BE PILFERED, THERE ARE *OTHER* ITEMS OF VALUE HERE
Huh?
I DON'T UNDERSTAND
YOU WILL
WHAT DO WE *DO* WITH HIM?
KILL HIM
WE HAVE ENOUGH TO WORRY ABOUT WITHOUT GOING TO WAR HARBORING A THIEF IN OUR MIDST

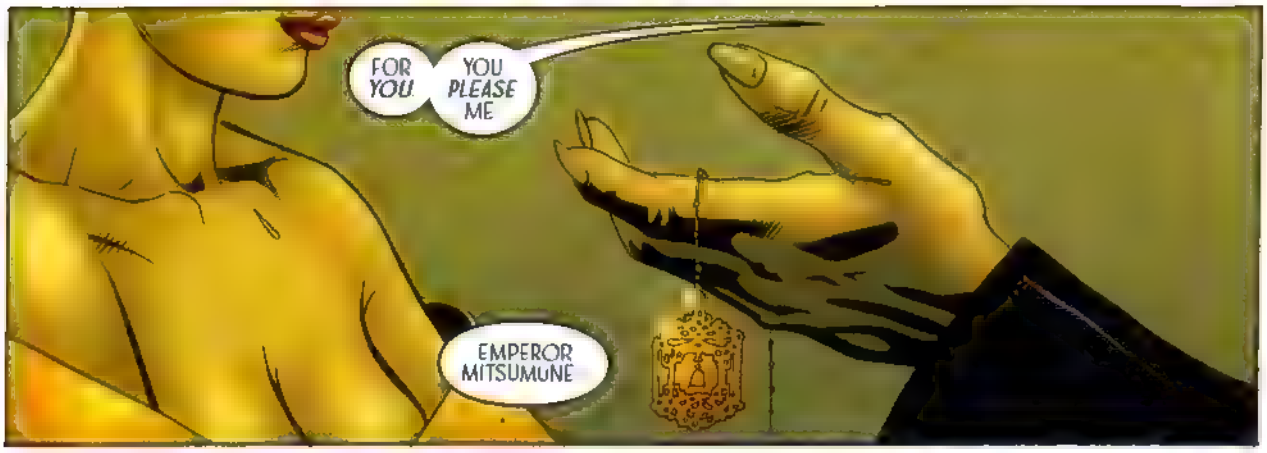
"GLORIOUS YAZAKI"
I DID NOT KNOW IT WAS A PLACE OF SUCH BEAUTY
DO YOU SEE THE WAY THEY GAZE AT ME, PO PO?
ARE YOU SURE WE CANNOT TARRY HERE A SHORT TIME
SINCE THERE ARE SO MANY SIGHTS TO BE SEEN?
EYES FORWARD, STUPID!
THEY WOULD BE MUCH LESS FRIENDLY IF THEY KNEW YOU HAD NO MONEY!
OWW!
PAY ATTENTION TO THE TASK AT HAND
OUR GOAL LIES JUST AHEAD
YOU NEVER LET ME HAVE ANY FUN


I DO NOT THINK I SHOULD HAVE AGREED TO THIS

YOU
MOVE ON.
BUT I WISH TO SEE THE EMPEROR

NO ONE SEES THE EMPEROR
MOVE ON, PEASANT
I AM NO PEASANT I AM A THIEF

AND I BRING NEWS OF THE REBELS.


FOR YOU
YOU PLEASE ME
EMPEROR MITSUMUNE

FORGIVE ME FOR INTERRUPTING YOUR RELAXATION BUT A MATTER THAT MIGHT BE *WORTHY* OF YOUR ATTENTION HAS PRESENTED ITSELF
AND WHAT COULD BE OF SUCH IMPORTANCE?

HE CALLS HIMSELF *BOON SAI HONG*.
HE IS FROM SHINACEA, BUT OF LATE, HE HAS BEEN AT TAKAIHASHI, THE MONASTERY USED AS HEADQUARTERS FOR THE *REBELLION* OBO-SAN FOMENTS.

THE REST OF YOU
GO

YOU HAVE BEEN WITH OBO-SAN?

GREAT EMPEROR MITSUMUNE—
—I AM MOST HONORED TO BE IN THE PRESENCE OF SUCH AN AUGUST AND GENEROUS -
GET ON WITH IT
LORD, I AM A THIEF, SENT TO TAKAIHASHI BY THE EQUALLY GREAT EMPEROR ZHENG IN ORDER TO STEAL THE WEAPON OF HEAVEN
I CREPT PAST THE SLUMBERING TROOPS, INSIDE THE MONASTERY WALLS, INTO OBO SAN'S OWN BEDCHAMBER
AND MADE AWAY WITH THIS
I BELIEVED THE WEAPON OF HEAVEN TO BE WITHIN, BUT ALAS
I WAS MISTAKEN
I AM NO WARRIOR SUCH AS YOU MUST BE, SO I CANNOT BE SURE
BUT I THINK THESE ARE THE BATTLE PLANS OF THE REBELS
TROOP STRENGTHS AND MOVEMENTS, TIMES AND PLACES OF ATTACK
YOU EXPECT ME TO BELIEVE THAT BY SHEER LUCK
OR PERHAPS SHEER STUPIDITY
YOU WALKED AWAY WITH OBO-SAN'S BATTLE PLANS?
I DO

GHRRK!
YOu WOULD DARE COME HERE AND LIE TO ME?
PLEASE
T'S THE TRUTH
IS IT?
IS IT?

YOU DO NOT WAVER, EVEN IN THE FACE OF DEATH
PERHAPS YOU ARE TRUTHFUL AFTER ALL
I AM!
GREAT EMPEROR I HAD HOPED MY SERVICE WOULD BE WORTHY OF SOME SMALL REWARD
I GIVE YOU YOUR LIFE
WHAT GREATER PRIZE IS THERE THAN THAT?
REMOVE THE THIEF
SEE TO IT THAT HE'S SENT BACK TO HIS HOMELAND
AS YOU WISH, EMPEROR
BRING ME MY GENERAL
MY LIFE WHAT A TERRIBLE REWARD
WE NOW HAVE THE MEANS TO CRUSH OBO-SAN AND HIS REBELLION

AND DON'T COME BACK!
UHFF!
THIS WHOLE TRIP WAS USELESS
SO TRUE YOU YET LIVE TO ANNOY ME
I DON'T CARE IF THESE PEOPLE ALL KILL EACH OTHER
WELL, THAT'S NOTHING NEW, SO I HAVEN'T LOST ANYTHING
WE'LL FIND OUR OWN WAY BACK TO SHINACEA
YOU DO REALIZE THAT ZHENG WILL WANT YOU DEAD FOR FAILING HIM
AND AT THE VERY LEAST
I'M NOT GOING HOME EMPTY HANDED

YOU SEEM TROUBLED, GENERAL RYUICHI
I AM NOT CONVINCED OF THE WISDOM OF OUR TACTICS
I FIND IT MOST UNLIKELY WE WILL SUCCEED IN SURPRISING OBO SAN'S ARMY
YOU DOUBT THE VERACITY OF THE STOLEN PLANS?
OF COURSE
BUT WE ALL MUST DO AS OUR EMPEROR COMMANDS

WE'RE *INDEBTED* TO THAT FOOL OF A THIEF
THE IMPERIAL ARMY BELIEVES IT MARCHES OFF TO LIE IN *AMBUSH* FOR US
RYUICHI HAS TAKEN THE BAIT.
NO
MITSUMUNE HAS TAKEN THE BAIT RYUICHI IS SMART ENOUGH TO *KNOW BETTER*
YET HE CAN DO NOTHING SAVE OBEY THE DICTATES OF THE MADMAN WHO SITS ON THE THRONE OF PETALS
EITHER WAY
HIS FORCE IS *VULNERABLE* TO US

I DESPISE THE NECESSITY OF WHAT WE MUST DO
SONS OF NAYADO ARE ABOUT TO BE PITTED AGAINST ONE ANOTHER
LOYAL BLOOD IS ABOUT TO BE SPILLED
BUT WHAT WE DO
WE DO FOR THE SOUL OF OUR LAND!
FORWARD, YOU SAVIORS!

FORWARD FOR
NAVADO!

I WAS DRAWN TO THIS PLACE BECAUSE THERE WAS A **STORY** TO BE HAD HERE
I HAVE WATCHED AS IT **UNFOLDED** BEFORE ME, A PANORAMA OF GODS AND DEMONS, OF HEROES AND VILLAINS
AND NOW, FINALLY, THE **ENDING** OF IT ALL IS UPON US

NNGAH!
AWAY, CARRION EATER.
Away
Ahhh

MEN OF HONOR
writer
RON MARZ
penciler
PATRICK
WTF?

I'D THOUGHT I WAS THE ONLY ONE LEFT
BOTH ARMIES HAVE GONE
THE VICTORS AS WELL AS THE VANQUISHED
YOU SHALL NOT FIND ME SO EASILY VANQUISHED, MONK!
THIS BATTLE IS OVER
OBO-SAN TRIUMPHED
THE IMPERIAL FORCES WITHDREW IN DEFEAT
THERE IS NO NEED FOR MORE WAR HERE
THEN KILL ME AND BE DONE WITH IT!

HAS THERE NOT BEEN *ENOUGH* BLOODSHED THIS DAY?
I WOULD JOIN MY BROTHERS WHO WERE BLESSED ENOUGH TO *PERISH* IN BATTLE
IF *YOU* WILL NOT END MY SHAME
YOU NEED NOT DO THIS THING
I *MUST* WHETHER YOU WILL AID ME OR NOT
I SHALL DO SO *MYSELF*
AT LEAST GRANT ME THE FAVOR OF ACTING AS MY *SECOND*, HOLY MAN
YOU ARE A *MONK* YOU DO NOT UNDERSTAND THE PATH I WALK
I *DO* KNOW SOMETHING OF DEVOTION

I AM DEVOTED TO OBO SAN'S CAUSE, BECAUSE I WOULD PRESERVE NAYADO
YOU ARE DEVOTED TO THE EMPEROR BECAUSE YOU WOULD PRESERVE NAYADO
YOU SEE? OUR LAND WILL NEED ALL ITS SONS IF IT IS TO RECOVER FROM THESE WOUNDS WE INFLICT UPON IT
BUT HONOR
HONOR DEMANDS I TAKE MY OWN LIFE
YOU HAVE COURAGE ENOUGH TO END YOUR LIFE
DO YOU HAVE COURAGE ENOUGH TO LIVE?
I
YES
WE CAME TO THIS PLACE AS ENEMIES, SAMURA
LET US LEAVE IT AS BROTHERS
END

Lady Death: THE WILD HUNT: PREVIEW INSIDE!

THE PATH®

CrossGen

#23 APRIL 2004

RON MARZ
MARK PENNINGTON
ANDREW CROSSLEY

Thus Far On
The Path

Obo-san

Wulf

Aiko

The monk Obo-san has reluctantly decided to rebel against his friend, the Emperor Mitsumune, ruler of the feudal kingdom of Nayado. Mitsumune appears mad at the very least, having been resurrected from the dead and displaying powers far beyond mortal scope.

Aiding Obo-san in his efforts are his fellow outsiders Wulf and Aiko, who have helped him recruit an army for the rebellion. In addition to this army, Obo-san also possesses the Weapon of Heaven, an object of terrible might left behind by the gods. The war of rebellion now rages, and the end draws near.

Mitsumune

Ryuichi

Ron MARZ
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PENCILER

Mark PENNINGTON
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Troy PETERI
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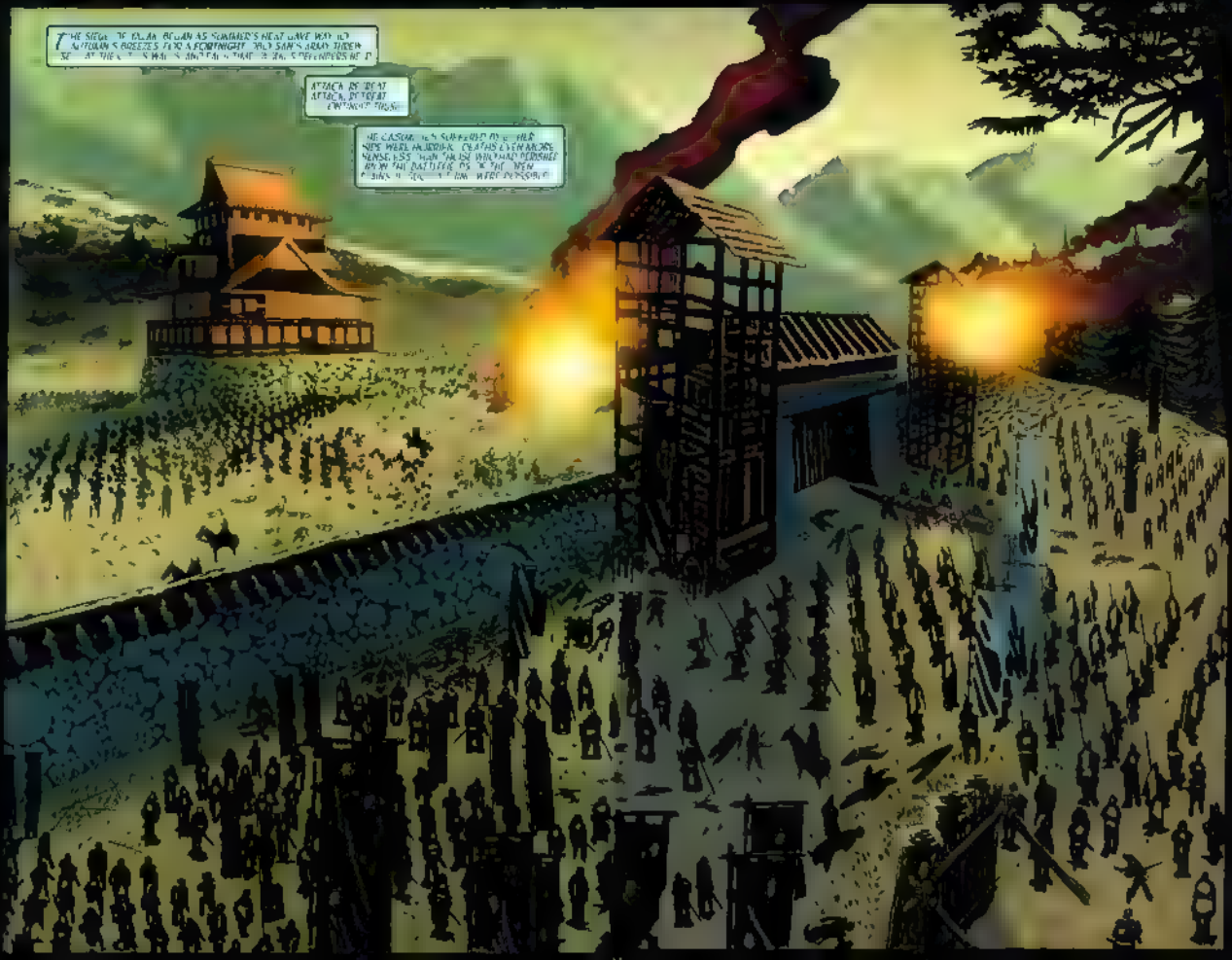
I AM A STORYTELLER
I CAME TO THIS PLACE SEEKING TALES OF HEROIC DEEDS, OF LOVE AND HATE, OF TRIUMPH AND TRAGEDY AND THESE I FOUND
BUT NOW MY TIME HERE IS DONE. SOON I SHALL BE GONE, NEVERMORE TO RETURN TO THIS LAND
SO BEFORE I DEPART, I SET DOWN THIS TALE, IN ORDER THAT IT MIGHT BE REPEATED THROUGH THE AGES

WAR RAGED ACROSS THE ISLANDS OF NAYADO AND THOUGH THE REBELS WERE SORELY OUTNUMBERED, VICTORY WAS OFTEN THEIRS
IMPERIAL BANNERS WERE PULLED DOWN..
..AND GOLDEN-ARMORED SOLDIERS WERE SLAUGHTERED IN THE MUD

RYUICHI HIMSELF DELIVERED NEWS OF THE DEFEATS TO MITSUMUNE. THE REBELS, HE TOLD HIS MASTER, WERE ADVANCING TOWARD THE CAPITAL UNCHECKED BECAUSE RYUICHI HAD NEITHER THE **MEN** NOR THE **MEANS** TO STOP THEM

LEFT WITH NO OTHER CHOICE, RYUICHI HAD BROUGHT HIS REMAINING FORCES WITHIN YAZAKI'S WALLS AND **SEALED** THE CITY GATES. EACH MAN HAD PLEDGED HIS LIFE TO DEFEND THAT OF THE EMPEROR. ALL THIS MITSUMUNE ACCEPTED WITH A CARELESS, ALMOST INHUMAN CALM


THE SIEGE OF ALAM BEGAN AS SUMMER'S HEAT GAVE WAY TO AUTUMN'S BREEZES. FOR A FORTNIGHT, KING SAM'S ARMY TIGHTENED ITS GRIP ON THE CITY, AND THE DEFENDERS BEGAN TO DESPAIR.
ATTACK OF THE BEAT ATTACK, DEFEAT EVERYONE THERE.
THE CASTLE WAS SURROUNDED BY SIEGE TOWERS. THE WALLS WERE HEAVILY DEFENDED, BUT THE SENSELESS SLAUGHTER OF THE WARRIORS OF ALAM DEMORALIZED THE DEFENDERS.

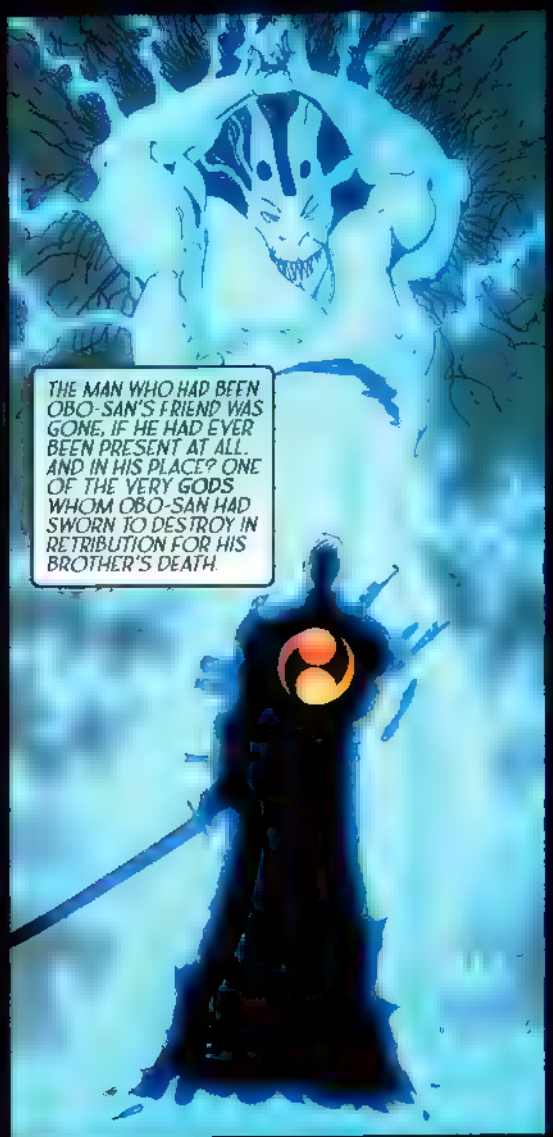
IN THE REBEL ENCAMPMENT, THE LORD OF THE NOGAWAS, LORD SHIGETADA, FINALLY SAW A CHANCE FOR THE TREACHERY HE HAD LONG PLANNED A BETRAYAL OF OBO SAN WOULD BREAK THE REBELLION, PRESERVE MITSUMUNE'S RULE, AND OBTAIN FOR SHIGETADA A PLACE AT THE EMPEROR'S RIGHT HAND

BUT WULF BROUGHT A SWIFT END TO HIS TREACHERY WITH A GESTURE THAT ALL BUT GUARANTEED THE LOYALTY OF THE REMAINING NOGAWA SAMURAI

ON THE TWENTY SECOND DAY, OBO-SAN CALLED AN END TO THE SIEGE, AND STRODE OUT FROM HIS LINES. THE SIEGE HAD PROVEN TOO COSTLY TO BOTH SIDES. TOO MANY LIVES THROWN AWAY
OBO-SAN DEMANDED THAT MITSUMUNE FACE HIM IN SINGLE COMBAT. THE FATE OF THEIR BATTLE WOULD DECIDE THE FATE OF NAYADO ITSELF
AND THEN HE WAITED
AFTER A TIME, THE GREAT GATES OF YAZAKI GROANED AND SLOWLY CREPT OPEN
AND MITSUMUNE EMERGED, BEARING THE SWORD OF HIS ANCESTORS

AND SO BEGAN THE BATTLE FOR THE VERY SOUL OF NAYADO

IT WAS A BATTLE BETWEEN TWO MEN ONLY BRIEFLY, AS THE THING THAT HAD WORN MITSUMUNE'S FLESH BEGAN TO REVEAL ITS TRUE SELF

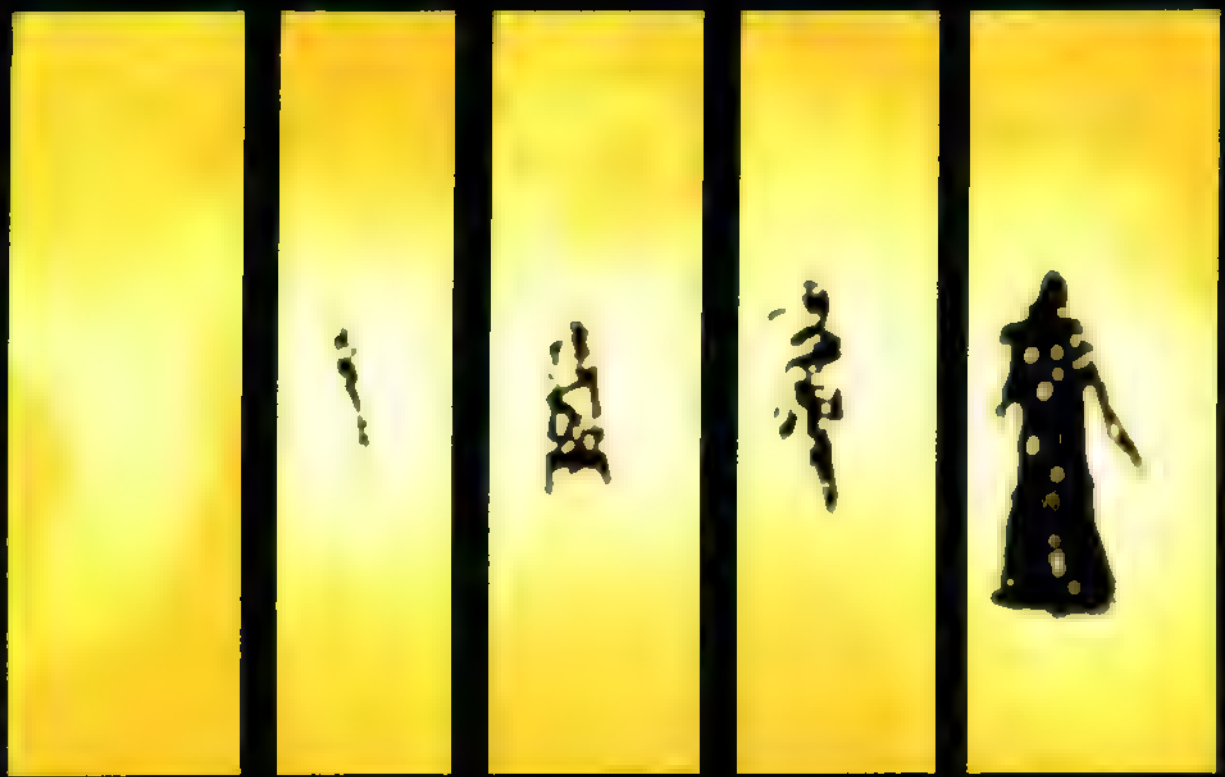

THE MAN WHO HAD BEEN OBO-SAN'S FRIEND WAS GONE, IF HE HAD EVER BEEN PRESENT AT ALL. AND IN HIS PLACE? ONE OF THE VERY GODS WHOM OBO-SAN HAD SWORN TO DESTROY IN RETRIBUTION FOR HIS BROTHER'S DEATH

OBO SAN TOOK HOLD OF THE WEAPON OF HEAVEN

AND FORCED THE GOD BACK BEFORE ITS POWER, FOR ONLY A THING OF THE GODS CAN BE USED AGAINST THE GODS.

THOSE WHO BORE WITNESS THAT DAY WOULD TELL YOU TWO SCREAMS ECHOED THERE. A SOUND OF RAGE GIVEN VOICE BY OBO-SAN, AND A HOWL OF TERROR TORN FROM THE GOD'S THROAT

AND THEN, WILLING TO TRADE HIS LIFE FOR THAT OF HIS HOMELAND, OBO-SAN UNLEASHED THE FULLNESS OF THE WEAPON'S MIGHT



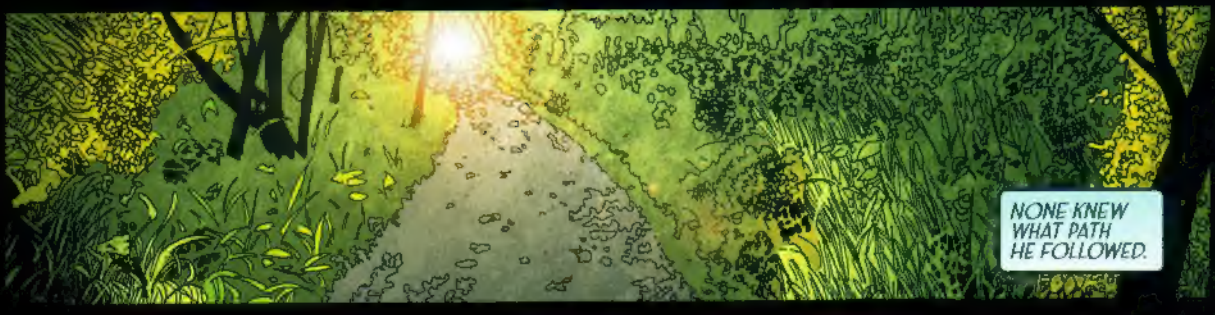
OF THE GOD THERE WAS NO TRACE AMID THE CLEARING SMOKE..
ONLY OBO-SAN REMAINED
THE JOY OF COMPANIONS WAS NOT MERELY FOR THE TRIUMPH OF THEIR REBELLION AND THE PRESERVATION OF THAT FOR WHICH THEY HAD FOUGHT, BUT FOR THE MIRACULOUS SURVIVAL OF THEIR LEADER AS WELL

SHAMED IN DEFEAT, RYUICHI PROSTRATED HIMSELF BEFORE OBO-SAN AND OFFERED TO TAKE HIS OWN LIFE IN PENANCE.
BUT OBO-SAN RAISED HIM UP...
...AND PLACED UPON HIM THE BURDEN OF NAYADO'S FUTURE.
HE REMAINS UPON THE THRONE OF PETALS TODAY.

SWORDS WERE SHEATHED, WOUNDS WERE BOUND.
IT WAS A TIME FOR HEALING, PERHAPS A TIME FOR LOVES LONG UNREQUITED TO FINALLY GIVE IN TO THEIR PASSIONS.
BUT IT WAS NOT TO BE.
FOR OBO-SAN AND AIKO, THERE WAS A PARTING. OBO-SAN COULD NOT BE WITH ANOTHER UNTIL HE COULD BE AT PEACE WITH HIMSELF.
IN SOME TALES, THE ENDINGS ARE NOT HAPPY ONES.

OBO-SAN GATHERED WHAT LITTLE HE NEEDED AND SET OFF UPON A JOURNEY.

IF HE KNEW WHAT HE SOUGHT, HE TOLD NO ONE.


NONE KNEW WHAT PATH HE FOLLOWED.

END
THIS IS THE LAST ISSUE OF THE PATH...BUT IT IS NOT THE END OF OBO-SAN! THANK YOU FOR JOINING US FOR THIS JOURNEY, AND WE HOPE THAT YOU'LL JOIN OBO-SAN AS HE FIGHTS CHARON'S ARMY IN NEGATION WAR!